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Jeremy Begbie

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Music in the Western Theological Tradition

Jeremy Begbie

This entry examines the ways in which Christian theology has shaped and elucidated the activities of music-making and music-hearing, and in turn how musical practices have been appropriated to advance the enterprise of theology. Attention is focused primarily (though not exclusively) on textless music, and primarily to the music–theology interplay as it has been exemplified in Western Christian traditions.

The most influential stream of thought governing the construal of music in Christian antiquity and the medieval era derives from Pythagoras and Plato, and was baptized into the church primarily through Augustine and Boethius. Musical sound mediates the numerical order of the cosmos, and in this way comes to possess both intellectual and ethical significance for those who participate in it. Theologically speaking, musical sounds can enable the ascent of the soul and bring about an apprehension of the 'eternal numbers' rooted in God, while also carrying the danger of pulling the soul away from God towards idolatry. In the Middle Ages, this broad understanding of music was instilled in the educational curriculum and widely enjoined in worship. However, in the late medieval era and in the sixteenth-century Reformations, its dominance waned. Music became increasingly distanced from a theologically grounded cosmos, and in due course was conceived primarily in anthropological and non-theological terms.

In modernity, music has often been caught up in attempts to reinstate viable theological or religious sensibilities in contexts where the world tends to be imagined naturalistically. Some have seen music as playing a key role in stimulating a universal religious sensibility. Others have related music more directly to scriptural and doctrinal norms. In addition to showing the fruitfulness of theology for music, some theologians have been keen to demonstrate the potential of music for the enrichment of theology.

The entry concludes by examining some of recent trajectories in musico-theological discourses: the growth of historically focused studies; the privileging of sociocultural perspectives; a keen interest in concepts such as presence, sacrament, ineffability, and transcendence; and a broadening both of the range of issues engaged and the diversity of participants involved.

Keywords: Music, Christian theology, Theology and the arts, Presence, Sacrament, Transcendence, Ineffability, Modernity, Creation, Creativity, Jesus Christ, Trinity

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1 Introduction

An interaction between Christian theology and music has always been present to some degree in the church's history, though it has taken a wide variety of forms and has often been more implicit than explicit. Unsurprisingly, music in worship has had the largest share of attention, but even then, theological commitments are usually in play whose relevance for music extends far beyond the activity of worship.

This entry will focus primarily on the ways in which sustained reflection on patterns of Christian belief have been employed to elucidate the practices of music-making and music-hearing. Reference will also be made to how these practices have been appropriated to enrich and advance the enterprise of theology. The scope of the discussion will be confined largely to textless music in order that the distinctive capacities of musical sound may receive maximum attention, while acknowledging that music is always to some extent intertwined with language. Further, the focus will be primarily on the interplay of music and theology in the Western traditions of the church. In the Christian East, theology and music have been deeply intertwined, but in ways that turn on somewhat different axes than the West, and that tend to be limited to consideration of music in the church's liturgy (Moody 2015; Lossky 2003; Schiefelbein 2009).

2 Classical and premodern traditions

With the rise of Christianity, its rapid spread into Latin- and Greek-speaking realms and its eventual political dominance, the distinctive tenets of the new faith became entwined to varying degrees with the leading philosophical traditions of classical culture, and this persisted in one form or another throughout the Middle Ages. It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find that Christian reflection on music during these periods is to a large extent shaped by these ancient streams of thought.

2.1 The 'Great Tradition': Plato, Augustine, Boethius

As far as music is concerned, by far the most influential stream derived from the semi-mythical figure of Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 490 BCE) and Plato (427–347 BCE). Crucial here was the notion that musical sound, especially musical harmony, is capable of mediating cosmic order, an order that is numerically constituted from top to bottom (James 1993; Mathieson 2002). Pythagoras is credited with having discovered that the basic consonances of ancient Greek music can be expressed in numerical ratios; he is also associated with the beguiling notion of 'the music of the spheres' – the belief that planets and stars of different sizes emit different pitches, giving rise to a vast but inaudible cosmic music. In Plato's writings, Pythagorean and related elements of music theory are woven together to encompass not only the world's mathematical proportions but also

those of the human soul and body: music thus comes to possess not only cosmological significance, but by virtue of that, moral power (Plato 1965). Music offers not only a model of harmonious balance, unity, and integrity; it can actually instil cosmic harmony into the soul.

In the early Eastern Church, the notion of music 'sounding' a divinely ordered universe can be found in many sources (Ferguson 1993; Pelosi 2020). In the West, the Platonic-Pythagorean outlook was baptized into Christian theology principally by Augustine (350–430) and Boethius (c. 480–525). In his early unfinished work, *De Musica*, Augustine unfolds a vision in which audible music – music as practiced, sung, and played – renders to our ears creation's numerical proportions, proportions deriving from the immutable, eternal numbers rooted in God and according to which God creates all things. The human soul, directed by God, is able to ascend from the lowest proportions to the highest, from the most basic harmonies to the music of God, in an attitude and movement of love. We are thus not to be captivated by the pleasure of musical sounds for their own sake but should seek to follow a momentum in which we come to apprehend the non-material patterning in which those sounds participate (Augustine of Hippo 1947; Harrison 2011; 2019).

Augustine's anxiety about music's downward drag towards the finite and mutable is taken up in his *Confessions*, where his intense alertness to idolatry leads him to affirm that while music has immense positive potential when accompanying texts in worship, because of its materiality, sensuality, and intense affective potency, it can easily foster an unhealthy attachment to the things of this life. So Augustine can cry to God:

> How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. (*Confessions* IX: 6.14; Augustine of Hippo 1992)

But he can also urge that when we sing in corporate worship, we do so in such a way that 'the meaning of the words' can penetrate more deeply; it is a 'sin deserving punishment' if 'the music moves me more than the subject of the song'. In short, he tells us, 'I fluctuate between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect [of music]' (*Confessions* X: 33.50; Augustine of Hippo 1992). No less an important figure in Christian antiquity's appraisal of music was the philosopher, poet, and politician Boethius (c. 480–525), whose reflections in *De institutione musica* drew together a substantial body of earlier wisdom in ways that proved highly influential in the succeeding centuries, especially for the church's worship (Boethius 1989). For him, the physical sound of music (*musica instrumentalis*) is to be regarded as a first step (and only a first step)

towards apprehending the unheard harmonies of the soul and the universe, consonances ultimately instantiated in God.

There is, then, a distinctive intellectual drive evident in this current of music theory: the ears may hear musical sound but only the mind can grasp and interpret their harmony. This renders the status of those who practice music somewhat ambiguous, an issue wrestled with repeatedly in the centuries that follow. Some commentators also point here to an inclination to downplay the biblical stress on the full goodness and reality of created matter (including the human body), endowed with a distinctive beauty that God values *as* distinctive.

2.2 Aristoxenus and the integrity of musical perception

Whatever force of these critiques, the prioritizing of the intellectual in the Pythagorean-Platonic outlook contrasts markedly with that of another less dominant ancient tradition associated with Aristoxenus of Tarentum (b. 375 BCE), a pupil of Aristotle who some regard as being the inventor of the discipline of musicology (Barker 1978; Gibson 2005). Aristoxenus sought a perspective on music more Aristotelian, more empirically grounded than the 'great tradition'. Here there is less concern with ordering and assessing music according to a mathematically and metaphysically charged universe, and more with attending to the experience of musical sound, to what we perceive to be harmonious and melodious 'on the ground'. This cast of thinking by no means disappeared with Aristoxenus. In the sixteenth century it is evident in John Calvin, to cite a notable example. With modernity's virtual abandonment of the kind of metaphysics that sustained so much early and medieval theology, it is an approach to music's value and significance that has proved immensely influential in the modern West.

2.3 Medieval variations

The trajectories opened up by Augustine and Boethius were carried forward and modified throughout the medieval period. Wherever sounded music is theorized, we find a recurring desire to identify its roots ontologically and mathematically in a cosmos created and upheld by the Christian God (Spitzer 1963; Hicks 2017). This proved to be a compelling way to understand music's place within an educational curriculum, and to provide theological criteria for the ethical evaluation of music, not least in the Church's liturgy. In the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth/sixth century), the harmony of the spheres becomes the harmony of the angelic choirs – a long-lasting theme in medieval musical speculation (Pseudo-Dionysius 2012). The Boethian intellectualist accent and its associated inclination to play down or denigrate the physical practices of music set the tone for many treatises. The musical thinker (*musicus*), trained to understand the 'why' of music, was commonly seen as far superior to the performing musician (*cantus*) who understood only the 'how'. In the eleventh century, Guido of Arezzo could write:

> Great is the difference between musicians and singers,
> The latter *say*, the former *know* what music comprises.
> And he who does what he does not know is defined as a beast. (Bower 2002: 16, original emphasis)

The relation of music theory to the down-to-earth business of singing and playing in worship thus became a troubled one. By the early Middle Ages, it seems the chief concern of theorists was with practical music-making, specifically liturgical music. In the monasteries and schools attached to cathedral churches, many of the musical treatises were thus oriented more to these rather than speculative matters, especially to the art of singing well. The sheer complexity of much established music theory was undoubtedly a key factor here. As one modern writer puts it, '[t]heir authors pay their respects to Boethius in an introductory chapter or two and then turn, with evident relief, to more pressing topics' (Grout 1973: 56). Not surprisingly, there were many attempts secure a more fruitful relationship between practice and theory. Even as early as the sixth century, 'scholars were [...] struggling to apply the Classical view of music to the new liturgical music of the post-Roman West' (McCarthy 2011: 819). With the rise of what came to be known as 'Gregorian' chant – in essence, a single-line melody sung to Latin words in a flexible rhythm – various efforts were made to correlate it with Boethian schemes (Bower 2002: 158–164). Such attempts not only gave intellectual and cultural kudos to already established liturgical chant by associating it with classical culture; it also implicitly secured God's approval of certain types of sacred music. After all, these modes were thought to be God-given, implanted in creation and ultimately in the Creator himself.

For all its ingeniousness and imaginative power, this venerable and all-encompassing cosmic vision of music was (and is) bound to provoke a number of hard questions, especially when set against some major theological currents in the Christian scriptures. One problem, already mentioned, concerns a certain ambivalence about the God-given primordial goodness and full reality of the physical world, and the tendency to look beyond material sounds to the order or beauty they reflect or point to – in such a way as to risk leaving behind the material sounds themselves. Another was the propensity to demote music's bodily practices in favour of its intellectual potential. Further, the keenness in much of the tradition to posit direct ontological commonalities between the world and God – to give the world's observed order an immediate divine sanction through some version of a metaphysics of the 'hierarchy of being' – inevitably raised questions about the distinctiveness and integrity of created order as *other* than God.

3 Music, modernity, and theology

3.1 The waning of the cosmic tradition

Although identifying the factors that led to the breakup of the medieval vision is contested among scholars, it is beyond dispute that in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we see a waning of confidence in the epistemic authority of the metaphysical synthesis that had sustained the church for centuries, a fresh emphasis on the integrity of human agency, and the growth of explanatory schemes no longer relying upon a commonly shared theological imagination of the physical world.

Music was bound to be caught up in these seismic shifts. The cosmological, metaphysical, and theological embeddedness of music assumed by most medieval music theorists was rendered deeply problematic for many. The nascent natural sciences began to demonstrate that sounding bodies do not wholly align with the numerical patterns hitherto believed to govern the universe (Heller-Roazen 2011). Instrumental music played on freshly constructed instruments (e.g. the harpsichord, the modern violin) bloomed, and this required schemes of tuning that lay outside the revered numerical systems of old – a move that raised questions about the viability of those systems, especially about their supposed divine authorization. By the early eighteenth century, we find the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition has been largely discarded except as a literary trope: 'stars no longer sang, and scales no longer laddered the sky' (Chua 1999: 21). The upshot is that insofar as early modernity situates music within the physical world at large, it is a world increasingly viewed as drained of metaphysical presence, theological or otherwise – in some cases it is imagined in entirely physicalist and naturalistic terms, possessing no meaning or significance other than that which humans grant it. Within what Charles Taylor calls 'exclusive humanism' – 'a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence' (Taylor 2007: 19–20) – music becomes progressively construed as an *anthropological* art form, a potent tool of the human will, justified primarily in terms of human needs and aspirations, and not as a means of participating in, and witnessing to, a wider 'given' ecology. It is an outlook largely taken for granted today (though some theological treatments of music still draw directly on the more ancient language and theories, albeit modifying and augmenting them in the process, e.g. as in Ratzinger 2005).

These early modern realignments were to raise with fresh force the perennial question of music's relation to language. If the older universal mathematics could no longer underwrite music in the way it once did, many felt that in order to give music semantic respectability, to justify it as potentially truth-bearing, it had to be directly tied to language (through titles, or text-setting) – or at least understood as operating according to the rationality and patterns of referential language, i.e. the kind of language thought to reach its ideal form in the natural sciences. One of the commonest ways of demonstrating the language-like nature of music was to regard musical motifs and phrases as corresponding to particular affects or emotional states (Neubauer 1986; Thomas 1995: ch. 1).

3.2 Protestant struggles

The renewed concern with language was certainly pivotal to all the major Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, though less because of philosophical or cultural changes than because of their concern to recover a stress on God's appropriation of human language in God's self-communication, and on the normative role of scripture as God's written Word. This inevitably affected the way they assessed the place of music, especially in worship.

In his many scattered references to music, Martin Luther (1483–1546) – himself an able musician – the doctrine of creation is never far behind, with a strong stress on the Creator-creator distinction (Loewe [n.d.]). As Mark Mattes (2017) has shown, Luther held to a strong and vibrant theology of beauty. While not downplaying music's strong affective power (Anttila 2013: 106–127), Luther can cite the Platonic-Pythagorean theological cosmology openly and warmly (Luther 1965). For Luther, human-made music, and musical harmony in particular, engages with and makes audible the God-given order of the universe. Unlike some of his contemporaries, therefore, Luther is not especially anxious about instrumental music in worship, nor about the multiple melodies and voices of polyphony: indeed, polyphony can glorify God in its own right and witness to the freedom of the gospel irrespective of any words being sung. At the same time, none of this openness to music's non-verbal witness threatens or weakens Luther's commitment to the normativity of scripture or to the centrality of biblically based preaching.

Coming a generation after Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564) operates with an even more robust stress on the absolute distinction between Creator and created. Calvin was strongly committed to congregational singing in worship (unlike his Swiss counterpart, Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531] for whom all music in worship is disallowed), and responsible for one of the most influential songbooks in history, the Genevan Psalter. But in his discussions of music Calvin makes no direct reference to the medieval cosmological tradition, nor indeed to his own rich theology of creation (Begbie 2013: ch. 2). He came to believe in music as integral to worship because of its undeniable power in practice, and frames it ontologically in anthropological terms, as a uniquely apt medium for the edification of the church. Music has distinctive powers to intensify the heart's desire: 'we know from experience that song has great force and vigour to move (*d'esmouvoir*) and inflame (*enflamber*) people's hearts to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal (*zele*)' (Calvin 2001: 94). Music's very strength, however, is also its greatest danger. It can poison and disfigure the heart as much as rightly direct it, and bring disastrous moral consequences in its wake. Referencing Plato and Augustine, and drawing on strands in humanist thought, Calvin believes that music must be 'moderated' or tempered by words; and in order that the whole church can participate fully in worship, the words must be

audible and comprehensible. In practical terms, this means only the Psalms are to be sung, in the vernacular, and in unison (harmony and polyphony can only be distractions).

The transition from Luther to Calvin, therefore – with its distancing of music from a doctrine of creation, and the concomitant privileging of language's 'moderating' role – provides a striking example of the shift of sensibility from cosmological to anthropological noted in section 3.1.

The links between music and language were also explored at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), at which the Roman Catholic Church generated its own program of reform. Changes were recommended that were to set the scene for much of the development of church music in Catholicism that followed. Most notably, the audibility and intelligibility of texts was a prominent concern, in the wake of what was felt to be obscuring of textual meaning by an excess of musical artifice, and the careless and irresponsible use of 'secular' texts.

3.3 Music and religious awareness

In the course of the development of modern European thought and culture, especially notable is the way in which music becomes pulled into various theological wrestlings with the challenges of modernity, especially with the naturalistic and anti-metaphysical outlooks held by many to be implicated in the ascendancy of the natural sciences. In some cases, music comes to play a pivotal role in attempts to revivify a sense of the religious or sacred in a closed world, a universe bereft of gods, spirits, or transcendent forces (what Charles Taylor alludes to in his recurring phrase 'the immanent frame'; Taylor 2007).

Many of the attempts at 're-enchantment' involve modifying or reconfiguring traditional Christian dogma to some degree. Particular influential is a widespread tendency in European academic theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to interpret the distinctive commitments of different faith traditions in the light of a broad category of 'religion' or 'religious experience', and often in such a way as to posit a deeply rooted religious sensibility purportedly common to all humans. The motivations for this are many and varied – not only to locate a level of human awareness immune to the ever-advancing encroachments of science, but also to seek shared ground between adherents of different faiths, or indeed to find common cause between believers and those of little or no particular faith. In these contexts, music is readily appealed to as offering a paradigm of this religious sensibility.

3.3.1 The Romantics

A good example can be found in the early German Romantics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bowie 2006). Acutely aware of the barrenness of the universe supposedly portrayed by natural science together with the aridity of various of 'rational'

religion, many of the Romantics turned to music to restimulate the seeds of a religious imagination. In writers such as 'Novalis' (G. P. F. F. von Hardenberg, 1772–1801), Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), and W. H. Wackenroder (1773–1798), music is accorded an exalted – in some cases quasi-divine – potency, robed in a glowing metaphysics of the infinite. Instrumental music, so long demoted in early modernity, now comes into its own, unencumbered by the specificity of words and concepts (Bonds 2006; 2014). In some respects, this can be read as a revival of the long discredited medieval metaphysics. But the theology has been drastically reconstructed: music 'sounds' the inaudible, but in the Romantic imagination the inaudible is not the ratios of God's cosmos but the infinite play of the world's immanent spirit coursing through all things, which (for many) comes to realization supremely in and through the creativity of the artist-musician. This lofty vision finds a number of expressions in the succeeding decades of the nineteenth century, most notably in Arthur Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) notion of music as the representation of an endlessly striving metaphysical Will (Ferrara 1996).

3.3.2 Schleiermacher

Music plays a conspicuous part in the work of the most distinguished theologian of this period, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher was a thinker profoundly influenced by the Romantics yet less hyperbolic, and drawing much more directly on the church's traditional theological discourse. Determined that the church engage with religion's 'cultured despisers' in society at large, Schleiermacher focuses attention on the concept of a prelinguistic and preconceptual 'immediate self-consciousness', or 'feeling' (*Gefühl*), that he believed was shared by all peoples. Theologically interpreted, this is 'the feeling of absolute dependence', the consciousness of being utterly dependent on God; or, expressed differently, being conscious-of-oneself-as-being-in-relation-to-God (Schleiermacher 2016: 12–18). Music emerges as highly significant in this context, as is made clear in Schleiermacher's charming Christmas Eve dialogue (Schleiermacher 1967), whose themes resonate strongly with the convictions of the (*Frühromantiker* – the notion of music tapping into a level of reality sensed only through immediate self-consciousness ('true content is the great chords of our inner nature' [1967: 47]), and exceeding the objectivizing of images and words ('every fine feeling comes completely to the fore only when we have found the right musical expression for it. Not the spoken word, for this can never be anything but indirect – a plastic element, if I may put it that way – but a real, uncluttered tone' [1967: 46]), and having to do with the universal rather than the contingent particular ('Nothing peculiar or accidental restrains either [singing or piety] [...] Never does music weep or laugh over particular circumstances, but always over life itself' [1967: 47]). More than any other art form, it is music – with its relative independence from language and determinate ideas, its lack of reference to particular things – that is able to open up and awaken that universal dimension of human experience that Schleiermacher distinguishes as specifically religious.

3.3.3 Music's 'extravagance'

An orientation towards a pervasive religious consciousness, a distancing from the particular and contingent, a concern to do justice to what exceeds language and concepts, and an eagerness to engage with a culture often resistant to traditional approaches to the divine: these mark many attempts to account for music theologically since Schleiermacher. One recent instance, seeking to be compatible with Christian theology, can be found in the work of David Brown and Gavin Hopps, in their book *The Extravagance of Music* (2018). Against the canvas of a broad and inclusive conception of religious awareness, we are invited to see music's theological potential in light of the notion of 'excess', or superfluity. Music can mediate an affectively charged experience that impels us beyond the linguistic and conceptual while still being coherent and compelling: 'we wish to defend', the authors say, 'the ability of music [...] to engender an awareness of something "other", (transcendent), which is at the same time incapable of complete description' (Brown and Hopps 2018: 5–6). Music's stubborn uncontainability by thought or language, its pressure towards exceeding limits, gives it a distinctive theological capacity: to elicit an awareness of divine transcendence and thus facilitate a sense of God's extravagant, gracious self-giving presence to the world. Brown and Hopps defend this outlook against the charge of escapism or otherworldliness: music is to be regarded first and foremost as a range of concrete, socially and culturally embedded practices, not primarily as a series of disembodied 'works'. At the same time, the properties of musical sounds are intrinsic to music's meaningfulness: for they provide an 'affordance structure' that draws the hearer in, contributing to the possibility of an encounter with the divine. Allied to this is the authors' keenness to allow music 'room' to be a medium of divine revelation in its own right, and thus to set aside where necessary theological prejudgments from scripture and doctrine that might lead us to neglect its revelatory possibilities.

3.4 Scriptural reimaginings

Other theologians have found themselves rather more wary of appeals to a generic religious-anthropological sensibility, given the tendency of such schemes to obfuscate the particularities of different faith traditions. While seeking to take due account of modernity's pressures and provocations, some have sought a direct and fresh immersion in the church's primary texts and practices with a view to opening up a theological ecology in which the arts – including music – can come more fully into their own. Eager to avoid giving priority to an ontology elaborated independently and in advance of God's focused self-revelation, there is here a sustained concentration on the historically grounded, decisive particularity of the one at the heart of that revelation, Jesus Christ.

3.4.1 Mozart and creation

One such figure is the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), whose reflections on music – which make no pretense to be comprehensive – are largely shaped by his christological theology of creation, in which divine and human, Creator and created are held to be irreducibly distinct ontologically yet inseparably related. Although versed in the music of many periods, Barth was devoted to one composer above all: 'I even have to confess', he writes, 'that if I ever get to heaven, I would first seek out Mozart, and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher' (Barth 1986: 16). What sets Mozart apart, claims Barth in *Church Dogmatics* III: 3, is the way his music embodies and gives voice to creation's praise of God, and creation precisely *as* created – limited and finite (Barth 1960: 297–299). The context here is a discussion of creation's 'shadowside (*Schattenseite*)', the world's quality of having been created out of nothing and therefore always being on the verge of collapsing back into nonexistence. Mozart's music sings the praise of the cosmos in its 'total goodness' (Barth 1960: 298), including its shadowside. What does it matter if Mozart died in misery like an 'unknown soldier', Barth asks, 'when a life is permitted simply and unpretentiously, and therefore serenely, authentically and impressively, to express the good creation of God, which also includes the limitation and end of man?' (Barth 1960: 298). Mozart heard in creation a harmony in which 'the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway' (Barth 1960: 298). The overriding impression conveyed by Mozart's music for Barth is God's almighty 'Yes' to creation.

According to Barth, then, Mozart's music does not strain for divinity. And neither does Mozart: he does not push his ego before us in some 'mania for self-expression' (Barth 1960: 298), nor try to force a 'message' on the listener. In fact he does not

> *will* to proclaim the praise of God. He just does it – precisely in that humility in which he himself is, so to speak, only the instrument with which he allows us to hear what he hears: what surges at him from God's creation, what rises in him, and must proceed from him. (Barth 1986: 37–38; original emphasis)

Though often dismissed as denying signals of God's presence in creation at large, Barth's discussion of what he called 'parables of the kingdom' and 'lights' of creation in *Church Dogmatics* IV: 3 tell a different story (Barth 1960: 38–165). He proposes that Christ, as the one true Word of God, can testify to himself and to his work of reconciliation through 'parables' that witness to his glory – not only in the Bible and the church but also in places where God is not discerned or acknowledged. Such 'signs' and 'attestations' are provisional, secondary, and eschatological, pointing to the uniqueness and primacy of revelation and reconciliation in Christ. Barth was writing this material at roughly the same

time as he was working on pieces celebrating the bicentenary of Mozart's birth, where he explicitly uses the phrase 'parables of the kingdom' of this composer's music. This does not negate the strictures on 'natural theology' to be found elsewhere in Barth's writings, for in his eyes no one's music (not even Mozart's) can of itself become an independent or normative source of divine revelation. Barth could thus speak of Mozart's music as 'theology', a 'miraculous' phenomenon akin to 'revelation', 'mediating' the constant praise of the cosmos, but only insofar as these claims comport with scripture and the gospel to which scripture testifies (Moseley 2011).

3.4.2 Christology and Trinity

Although Barth attends to music largely in light of his doctrine of creation, his theology as a whole is shaped by a scripturally grounded focus on Christology, linked to a robust ontology of the Trinity. Similar orientations are evident in more recent writings in which doctrinal loci and various musical phenomena are brought into close conversation: with regard to music and eschatology (Borthwick, Hart and Monti 2011), for example, or music and Christology (O'Connor 2011). In a number of writings, Jeremy Begbie has outlined the contours a theology of music that, while seeking to be alert to God's self-attestation in musical culture at large and the unique integrity of musical practices, is nonetheless oriented fundamentally to the witness of scripture and classical Nicene theology to the triunity of God as enacted in Christ, and to the highly idiosyncratic metaphysical landscape this witness opens up (Begbie 2000; 2007; 2013). Crucial here is the affirmation God's creation out of nothing through the eternal Son, issuing in a world unconditionally upheld and sustained by the mutual love of Father and Son in the Spirit. In this light, Begbie sees music as grounded in the ordered materiality of the world that embodied humans indwell, a world divinely intended as a meaningful environment for them to enjoy and explore, worthy of attention, cultivation, and enhancement. Making music is part of the human vocation to 'voice creation's praise', to extend and elaborate the song that creation already sings to its Creator. Sinful humanity's bizarre refusal to praise God is answered climactically in the Son's incarnation: the human Jesus offers the praise due to God, submits to the cataclysmic consequences of humankind's refusal of praise, and on the third day, is raised to a new mode of created being, prefiguring a final 'new creation'. A Christian construal of music, for Begbie, is thus set in the context of what is 'there before us': a new creation already established in Christ but yet to come in all its fullness. A vocation of renewal and re-creation is made possible for the creative musician: through the Holy Spirit, humans are invited to participate in God's renewal of all things. The material realities of sound are not only to be acknowledged and respected, but enabled to take on fresh, unpredictable, and richer forms, foreshadowing the eventual re-creation of all things. Related to this, Begbie engages in analysis of a range of music – not only 'classical', but a variety of popular song and improvised forms, including jazz.

4 Music for theology

For any at work at the music-theology interface, it soon becomes evident that the traffic can run both ways, not only from theology to music (most of the examples above fall into this category), but also from music to theology (Heaney 2012; 2022; Wright 2002). It might be thought that this will automatically give music an unduly dominant role methodologically, as if music could itself furnish the criteria – perhaps even the ultimate criteria – for assessing theological truth claims. But it is quite possible for music to contribute to and enrich theological discovery and articulation while maintaining an ultimate orientation to Christianity's normative sources.

A good example can be seen in the writings of German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), himself an accomplished musician whose writings contain numerous musical references (Pangritz 2019; Tarassenko 2024). It is in Bonhoeffer's final letters and papers that music comes to the fore in striking ways (see Bonhoeffer 2010). Incarcerated for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler, as the Second World War in Germany approaches its calamitous end, he ponders what shape Christian discipleship might take amid (and after) the turmoils of his time. Now removed from the political frenzy, his musical sensibilities have a chance to emerge and play a key part in forming his thought and language.

Apart from music heard very distantly in and beyond the prison, Bonhoeffer has only the music resounding in his memory: 'it's strange how music, when one listens with the inner ear alone and gives oneself up to it utterly, can be almost more beautiful than when heard physically' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 332). Yet these memories provide him with more than warm reassurance; they evoke a way or pattern of life Bonhoeffer believes the church sorely needs to recover. In his earlier work, Bonhoeffer spoke of Christ's relation to the world in terms of four divine 'mandates' – labour, marriage, government, and the church – and music is counted under the mandate of labour (Bonhoeffer 1965: 179). Now he locates it in 'the broad area of freedom', which embraces art, culture, friendship, and play. We pursue those things not because we must or have been commanded to do so, but simply for the joy of pursuing them. Bonhoeffer regards this gratuitous dimension as critical to the church's future life and witness (Bonhoeffer 2010: 268). In another place, Bonhoeffer ponders the fractured and dispersed character of wartime Germany, citing J. S. Bach's contrapuntal *tour de force*, *The Art of Fugue*, a piece of music Bach left incomplete (Bonhoeffer 2010: 306). Bonhoeffer also comments on a hymn by Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672), and asks, 'isn't this passage something like the "restoration" of all earthly desire?' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 306). Bonhoeffer's confidence lies in the final 'composing' or gathering together of all things in Christ, as in Eph 1:10.

But the most fecund and oft-quoted musical metaphor Bonhoeffer employs is 'the polyphony of life', which describes way in which multiple loves and desires can be held together through a *cantus firmus* (the principal coordinating theme found in many pieces of medieval polyphony). The *cantus firmus* here is our love for God: if this is secure, the other voices (our other loves) will find their place and flourish. 'When the cantus firmus is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 394). Bonhoeffer compares this interweaving of a *cantus firmus* and its surrounding voice to Christ's divinity and humanity:

> The two are 'undivided and yet distinct', as the Definition of Chalcedon says, like the divine and human natures in Christ. Is that perhaps why we are so at home with polyphony in music, why it is important to us, because it is the musical image of this christological fact and thus also our *vita christiana*? (Bonhoeffer 2010: 394)

It is worth adding that, as Joanna Tarassenko (2024) has recently shown, Bonhoeffer's appeal to polyphony appears to bring to the surface a latent doctrine of the Holy Spirit running through his theology at large, one that is in fact pivotal for his understanding of Christian formation in Christ. In sum, Bonhoeffer's love of music seems to have had a critical role in spawning and giving contours to that vision of Christian life in the Spirit he was struggling to articulate in his prison years – one that is intensely christological, free and hopeful, refusing any evasion of the concrete and practical, and where a diversity of interests and passions can flourish around one's love of God.

Drawing upon music to enrich and expand the conceptual and linguistic capacities of theology has many historical precedents. There are numerous examples in the early church fathers (Costache 2014; Ferguson 1993: 391–426; Pelosi 2020) and in medieval and early modern theology (Ciabattoni 2013; Bertoglio 2013). In recent years, jazz has often been drawn upon to model the improvisatory interplay between constraint and contingency, in a way that greatly illuminates a theological account of freedom in humans and the cosmos at large (Pederson 2001; Broadhead 2018). In these examples, music is being deployed to yield conceptual tools – modes of thinking, models, frameworks – as well as new language for exploring, clarifying, and reconceiving the dynamics of God's world and God's interaction with it. Several writers have underlined that music performs this function through concrete enactment: hearing or listening to music is first and foremost a matter of being caught up in a particular kind of bodily experience – it is in *this* way that it can deepen our theological understanding (see also Embodiment and Liturgy, especially section 4). Along these lines Jeremy Begbie, for example, has argued that music's entanglement with time has considerable potential for disclosing the character of time as a God-given dimension of the created world, and of the temporal character of

God's redemptive work (Begbie 2000). In addition, he has argued that a large part of the church's tendency to treat the threeness of God as essentially problematic, little more than an intellectually embarrassing conundrum, has been fuelled by an excessive reliance on visual conceptions of space, according to which the perception of the co-presence of irreducible threeness and oneness is a near impossibility. The hearing of a three-note chord facilitates an imagination of Father, Son, and Spirit 'in' and 'through' one another that would seem far more authentic to the co-inherence of the divine life as testified in, say, John's Gospel, and indeed to the principal lines of mainstream trinitarian theology (Begbie 2018b).

5 Late modern trajectories

Over the last thirty years or so, a number of developments – cultural, social, and philosophical – have generated a series of fresh questions and conversations for those seeking theological wisdom in the world of music, and vice versa.

5.1 Historically focused studies

Much of the recent theologically attuned scholarship in music has focused on particular composers and their output, and has moved far beyond merely attempting to link various pieces to their specific biographical background. So, for example, the literature on the theological dimensions of J. S. Bach (1685–1750) is now extensive and expanding, and generally more theologically adept than it used to be (e.g. Butt 2010; Chafe 2014; Tatlow 2015; Marissen 2016; Rathey 2016; White 2017; Petzoldt 2018). The foremost Roman Catholic composer of the twentieth century (and the most overt about his theological beliefs), Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), has attracted sizeable attention (Shenton 2010; van Mass 2009; Sholl 2011). Along with such studies, considerable energy has been invested in examining the theological determinants of music of particular periods: for example, the Reformations of the sixteenth century (Bertoglio 2017), or nineteenth-century Britain and Europe (Clarke 2012; Papanikolaou and Rathey 2022). One recent scholarly collection explores how music developments in Europe and America from the Baroque to the Romantic eras gives us a distinctive way of highlighting the critical theological issues at stake in the modern imagination of freedom (Begbie, Chua and Rathey 2020). The practice of singing is another area to receive penetrating theologico-historical study (Page 2010; Bloxam and Shenton 2017).

5.2 Sociocultural priorities

One of the most characteristic developments in virtually all academic musical–theoretical circles in the last few decades has been the emergence of a growing insistence on the social and cultural situatedness of all musical practices and discourse. Critical here is the appearance of the so-called 'new musicology' from the 1980s (challenging the

concentration of academic music criticism on ‘works’ abstracted from their historical, social, political, and cultural location: see Kerman 1985; Kramer 1990; Williams 2020), and a new interest in musical performance as an object of study in its own right (Cook 2013; Jost 2013). ‘Music’, it is urged, should never be regarded as a quasi-static object, but as a cluster of concrete, corporate, embodied practices (‘musicking’; Small 1998). The fixation of Western discourses on sound patterns permanently encoded in a score is thus regarded by many as redolent of a desire to occupy a neutral, acultural, apolitical, aesthetic zone, and – some will add – one that typically privileges white and socially powerful males (Ewell 2020). Indeed, the flourishing of feminist philosophy of music has done much to shift many of the categories in which musical discourses are commonly conducted.

The growth of popular music studies in the academy has also put these sociocultural matters much more firmly on the scholarly agenda, exposing the way in which analytical tools associated with Western art music have been inappropriately applied to, say, country music or calypso (Shepherd 2012). This has engendered among some a wariness about the scientific study of music, not least because it could encourage belief in transcultural ‘universals’ in music – evident in, for example, attempts to single out this or that form of music as more ‘naturally’ rooted than others (List 1971). Bound up with these developments has been the exponential availability of non-Western or ‘world’ music and rapid expansion of ethnomusicology (broadly, the anthropology of music) whose leading concerns have in many places become part of ‘mainstream’ musicology (Amico 2020; Rice 2014).

From a theological perspective, this eagerness to underline the concrete, bodily, and corporate should be welcomed, insofar as it resonates with a biblically aligned Christian anthropology. However, problems will obviously arise if it is insisted that music should not in any way be considered as grounded in realities that transcend the constructive and interests of a particular individual, society, or cultural grouping (Begbie 2023: 69–71). Even apart from theological objections, this would seem to run counter to a good deal of scientific research (another expanding field in music studies); one writer has pointed out that much of the scepticism about universals in music amounts to ‘a meta-critique of the concept of universals rather than a genuine attempt to consolidate information about the world’s musics into a collection of putative universals’ (Brown and Jordania 2011: 229). Without advocating a return to premodern musical cosmology, it could be argued that a Christian doctrine of creation is well suited to accommodate both a commitment to the pre-given integrity of a physical order we inhabit as bodily creatures, and to humankind’s constructive activity within that order, without seeing these two as necessarily set against each other in zero-sum terms (Begbie 2018a: 143–152).

It ought to be noted also that the rise and expansion of ethnomusicology has led to a series of empirically grounded studies in the music of worshipping congregations, in both

Western and non-Western settings. Although eschewing any reductive attempt to account for theological beliefs entirely in sociocultural terms, this current of research – drawing not only on ethnomusicology but also on media theory, social psychology, and ritual and performance studies – has shed telling light on how music in specific contexts of worship can foment and shape a 'lived theology' (Ingalls, Landau and Wagner 2013; Ingalls 2018). This has proved important not only for liturgical studies but for rethinking some of the most basic commitments and practices of the church.

5.3 Presence and sacrament

A good deal of recent musico-theological writing, however, has operated on a more philosophical and metaphysical plane, while maintaining an alertness to the sensibilities of late modern culture. One of the most widely discussed books in this respect is George Steiner's *Real Presences* (1989). With philosophical postmodernists in view, not least their wariness about robust theological claims, Steiner obliquely approaches the question of the divine, suggesting that 'it is [...] poetry, art and music which relate us most directly to that in being which is not ours' (Steiner 1989: 226). Expanding on this, Steiner opines that art arises from a primordial bid for freedom over against God the Creator, from a wrestling with the stubborn priority of the first 'let there be'.

> I believe that the making into being by the poet, artist and [...] by the composer, is *counter*-creation [...] It is radically agonistic. It is rival. In all substantive art-acts there beats an angry gaiety. The source is that of loving rage. The human maker rages at his coming *after*, at being, forever, second to the original and originating mystery of the forming of form. (Steiner 1989: 203–204, original emphasis)

And for Steiner it is music that exemplifies this more compellingly than any other art. For music is the most irreducible, the least amenable to being explicated in terms of realities that are already 'there before us', and thus the kind of artistic making that comes closest to God's initial act of creation. Music gestures towards an absolutely free presence, and this may in part account for the fact it 'has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed [...] for many human beings, religion has been the music which they believe in' (Steiner 1989: 218).

Theological questions may well be asked about what kind of deity haunts Steiner's allusive prose, for in this scenario God's basic relation to humans appears to be essentially antagonistic, and God's nature wholly undifferentiated, monadic (Horne 1995). Less stark in this respect, and relying more on the notion of music as a mediator of divine presence, are writers who speak of music in terms of sacrament or the sacramental. Albert Blackwell, for example, pulls from diverse sources (including Augustine, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards,

Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich, and Simone Weil) to demonstrate music's sacramental potential (Blackwell 1999). He understands 'sacramental' as applying to '*any finite reality through which the divine is perceived to be disclosed and communicated, and through which our human response to the divine assumes some measure of shape, form, and structure*' (Blackwell 1999: 28; quoting McBrien 1980: 731, original emphasis). Blackwell delineates two broad traditions of sacramental encounter in Christianity as applied to music: the 'Pythagorean' and the 'incarnational' (Blackwell 1999: 37–48). According to the first (already explored above), 'as mathematics expresses cosmic order, so music echoes cosmic harmony' (Blackwell 1999: 43). Reflection on this can engender a sense of trust in in the world's order which in turn can lead to 'trust in the second Person of the Trinity' (Blackwell 1999: 86), the world's *Logos*. The 'incarnational' tradition privileges the sensed materiality of music: citing Schleiermacher among others, Blackwell links the immediacy of embodied musical perception to a primordial religious awareness of the ultimate givenness of our lives and the world, of being wholly dependent on and immersed in a limitless ground.

5.4 Ineffability and transcendence

Lively and growing discussions have also been developing around philosophical concepts that may not necessarily be tied to theology but inevitably push in that direction. One such concept is ineffability. The belief that music's resistance to verbal expression makes it especially well suited to mediating a sense of the infinite is, in fact, a fairly common trope in modernity. As noted above (section 3.3.1), it was widely assumed among the early German Romantics, and has close links to the theological aura given by some to the concept of the 'sublime' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, together with the notion of 'absolute music' (music without any ties to words or texts).

However, it has reappeared many times since (Jankélévitch 2003; Gallope 2017). In one of the most discussed books along these lines, *Music and the Ineffable* (Jankélévitch 2003), the French musicologist and philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch proposes that music's purpose is to '*express infinitely that which cannot be explained*' (2003: 71, original emphasis). He distinguishes between the 'untellable' – what cannot be spoken about, and the 'ineffable' – what can be spoken about but in an infinite variety of ways. Music is ineffable in that there are 'infinite interminable things to be said of it' (2003: 72). In making or encountering music we discover an excess, an abundance of life that inevitably invites speech but always resists linguistic enclosure. In contrast to, for example, 'death's sterilizing inexplicability', music is marked by a 'fertile inexplicability' (2003: 127). Here, allusions to religion and theology appear aplenty. 'No one truly speaks of God, above all, not theologians' (2003: 102). Musical inspiration is a 'point of grace', one of the 'divine, sublime things that are vouchsafed to human beings in brief glimpses [...] at once dazzling and dubious' (2003: 127). Jankélévitch sees in 'negative theologies' a parallel

to his own concerns – words cannot, and should never presume to, encompass musical experience any more than they can the divine. The extent to which Jankélévitch intends his theologically loaded phrases to carry any 'realist' theological reference (to a deity for example) is not entirely clear. But others have been less hesitant, eager to claim that music's unspeakability, its 'fertile' indeterminacy, gives it significant theological potential, even offering – as one recent writer put it – a 'theology after writing' (Manning 2015: 65).

A good deal of theologically inflected writing on music and ineffability is marked by the conviction that the more disentangled music can become from language, the more theological lucid and potent it will become, a belief that would seem to sit awkwardly with the Christian's commitment to the intrinsic role of language in the dynamic of God's self-communicative action. Something similar might be said of some of the discussions surrounding transcendence, another area of extensive conversation between theology and music (e.g. Stone-Davis 2015). It has long been believed that there is some deeply rooted, perhaps even essential link between music and transcendence – the transcendence of language, certainly, but also music's transcending of conceptual thought, and perhaps even of the finite world. Many have remarked on the way in which the discourse of transcendence – along with words such as 'spiritual', 'sacred', and so forth – is readily employed to describe the experience of music across a wide variety of the population. Some who explore this link are keen to eschew theology altogether. The philosopher Andrew Bowie sees music as providing a temporary refuge, a 'secularized' transcendence in a culture that has exposed the 'fragility of the subject'. It betrays our need for, and attachment to things beyond our control, enabling us to feel temporarily at home in a cosmos that is in the last resort indifferent to all human needs and aspirations (Bowie 2007: 382). Others urge that music's *modus operandi* push us towards the more substantially theological. Roger Scruton's exploratory reflections on music and the sacred move in this direction (Scruton 2014). Kutter Callaway's reflections on film music offer another example: speaking of Pixar's films, and the way they refuse to evade the untidy ambiguity and darker dimensions of life, he claims that music

> is uniquely able to address these realities by opening the audience out into something larger than themselves, something that lies beyond the representational capacities of moving images. It signifies an ineffable presence that pervades the immanent frame of the cinematic world – a delicate yet distinctive beauty that somehow exists in the midst of the pain and the chaos. (Callaway 2013: 57)

Callaway sees strong resonances between this kind of felt presence and the transcendent Christian God. Others have cited composers whose music appears especially suited to

providing similar apprehensions. The output of Estonian Arvo Pärt has garnered much attention along these lines (Skipp 2012; Bouteneff 2015; Day 2015).

It is worth noting the strong apologetic motivation that often lies behind theological writing on music's transcendence and ineffability: namely, to appeal to those who profess little or no religious faith but who through music might nonetheless find themselves hospitable to theological perspectives, perhaps even to some of Christianity's central claims. The particular problem this presents to Christian theology is how to employ categories such as ineffability and transcendence fruitfully while maintaining a sense of their distinctive content, a content believed to be shaped decisively by God's self-revelation. Such terms, it will be pointed out, are far from being univocal across all religious traditions (Begbie 2018a).

5.5 Widening the conversation

It is fair to say that up until relatively recently, scholarship in music and theology in the modern world has been undertaken very largely by white males, principally in European and North American academic institutions, and converging mostly on Western (European and North American) music. Current discussions, however, are marked by an increasing diversity of interlocutors, a broadening range of settings, and a diversifying variety of musics. As the centres of theological activity shift and multiply globally, it is likely that this trend will continue.

So, for example, a corpus of theologically inflected writing has appeared on jazz, some of it focusing on particular musicians (Howison 2012), some portraying jazz as a theologically fertile genre by its very nature (Edgar 2022; Broadhead 2018), and some concentrating on issues of social (and especially racial) justice (Heltzel 2012). Theological treatments of 'popular' music have burgeoned (e.g. Marsh and Roberts 2012; Beaudoin 2013; Keuss 2011; Partridge 2014), developing nuanced forms of analysis and appraisal appropriate to the multimedia nature of the genre (Partridge and Moberg 2017; on hip-hop, see Hodge 2010; Mendes de Leon 2015). Some of these accounts appeal to a relatively diffuse 'spiritual' sensibility as an integral dimension of cultural production and reception (Gregory and Dines 2021) – evident, for example, in music that can be regarded as 'in-between' conservative confessional faith and hardline secularism (Hopps 2017). Some adopt a rather more critical edge, eager to point out not only the theological opportunities but the insidious dangers of popular culture at large (Romanowski 2000: 2007).

From a feminist perspective, Heidi Epstein's *Melting the Venusberg* (2005) broke new ground by drawing upon themes and drives within feminist musicology with a view to reconfiguring the music–theology landscape. Referencing women composers and performers from Hildegard of Bingen to Diamanda Galas, Epstein offers what she calls a 'very modest, gender-sensitive rearticulation of music's theological import' (Epstein

2005: ix). Epstein seeks to demonstrate that composers stimulate and orient our desires, reinforcing (and often subverting) norms of sexuality and gender construction in ways that radically question the way a great deal of Christian theology has been pursued. She exposes what she believes to have been the deleterious effects of masculinist assumptions and language in Western theologies of music – evident not only in modern and contemporary periods but in many of the classic readings of music in the Western Christian tradition at large. Epstein is especially disparaging of a pernicious tendency to suppress or shun music's embodied – and especially erotic – dimensions. Despite music being ineluctably rooted in our physical bodies, engendered, and enmeshed in power dynamics, the dominant philosophical thrust of Western theology of music has veered towards incorporeal abstraction, beguiled by a purportedly divinely endowed (and hierarchically structured) order, and tied to over-harmonized accounts of salvation that leave little room for disruption and dissonance.

Despite the pointedness of Epstein's case, the trajectories opened by her book have received relatively little scholarly attention. Feminist musicology has generated a flood of writing, but little of it engages with Christian theology at any depth. It needs to be remembered, however, that feminist thought has made a sizeable contribution in challenging of some of modernity's more troubling and questionable assumptions about music that we have highlighted above – challenges on which many recent theologies of music rely. Another topic receiving only limited musico-theological interest is that of music and race, both in churches and in society at large. The literature so far is fairly sparse (Gussow 2020; Reed 2003; Hunter 2022) but is likely to swell in light of the increasing engagement among contemporary theologians with critical race theory and the dynamics of racial injustice.

6 Concluding remarks

There can be little doubt that the exchange between music and Christian theology in the West has grown rapidly over the last few decades, an expansion that shows no signs of abating. The burgeoning of published theology (whether online or in print), the availability of virtually any form of music worldwide, and the thriving of the psychological, sociological, anthropological, and scientific study of music are creating the conditions for what looks like being an increasingly lively field. As it grows, a number of issues are likely to be pushed to the fore with increasing force, two of the most pressing being: (a) the relation between music and language (given that language is so integrally bound up with the identity of Christian faith, *and* that music is stubbornly resistant to being captured linguistically); and (b) theology's normative positioning: the ultimate criteria governing its work.

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