*Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies*
*Vol. 47 (2006) Nos. 1–2, pp. 51–88*

# *Quasi Una Sonata*: Postmodernism, Religion, and Music

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Abstract
(Українське резюме на ст. 88)

The relationship of music to religion is a complex and often ambivalent one. Even where obscured or ignored, religious faith can still be found, if obliquely, in modern music. The author reviews this relationship through analysis of musical theory as well as the works of such musicians as, inter alia, Wagner, Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Boulez, and especially Olivier Messiaen; and such philosophers and theologians as Augustine and Aquinas, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The "ground of possibility" of music is examined in the works of still others, including Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Alfred Schnittke, Galina Ustvolskaya, Sophia Gubaidulina, and Avro Part. Attention is paid to more "technical" aspects of music and their philosophical or theological connotations, including the role of serialism in music, the use of *glissando*, spatialisation, retrogradability, the *durée* and, especially, the role of the "diagonal." Pickstock concludes that in a musically and spiritually confused and often cacophonic age, there are nonetheless grounds for hope as music and faith are coming together with the human and divine.

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### *1. Initial Statement of Theme*

Music has often been regarded ambivalently by theologians. Augustine, Aquinas, and many others have indicated that while music is a suitable vehicle for the worship of God, because it reflects a divine order and harmony, it should remain subordinate to word and doctrine, which articulate this order with greater exactitude.[1]

A similar ambivalence would seem to be exhibited by the relationship of music to the process of secularisation. Music appears to be more closely related to religion than the other arts; many of its forms are liturgical in nature, and its ordered expression of joy has been connected with the offering of praise. While music is also associated with the work of mourning, the very conversion of sorrow into song can seem to tilt away from the tragic towards resignation, consolation, and eschatological hope. It would seem that the inherent bias of music is towards synchronic harmony and diachronic resolution. Nevertheless, the wordless character of music and its relative freedom from representation can suggest also a certain urging towards a mystical, non-dogmatic religion, or even a cult of music that would substitute for a cult of faith. It can be argued that the historical periods that have seen a gradual decline in the importance of Church attendance have also seen the emergence of the public concert, opera, and ballet as quasi-sacral rites which are neither sacral liturgical music nor occasional music, such as "table music" and music for dancing, nor music for private performance.

Music in the twentieth century seems to sustain this double-facing. Modernism in music stems in part from the later romanticism of Richard Wagner who had already distanced himself from the structures of fixed keys, and, with the invention of the *leitmotif*, allowed romantic expressivism to drift further away from the dominance of harmonic relation and melodic development. In Wagner's operas, the inter-communication of the internal discourses of the leitmotifs consti-

[1] For example, see Thomas Aquinas *ST* II–II q.91 a2 ad 3; Edward Booth, "Thomas Aquinas" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan Publishing, 1980).

tutes a non-dramatic subplot which is the esoteric aspect of these works. Closely allied with this esoteric aspect is Wagner's deliberate attempt to create a new secular sacrality, one which celebrates the possibility of absolute sacrificial self-commitment in erotic love: this enterprise reaches its consummation in his opera *Tristan and Isolde*.[2] In general, Wagner's music tends to reflect Schopenhauer's notion of a pure unteleological fated process undergirding reality and this allows a freeing-up of pure modulation from the constraints of proportionate concordance and repeatable tune. But the *leitmotiv* superimposes upon this the use of a super-essential *intermezzo* in the form of little *ritornelli*, little melodic and rhythmic folds which are then placed in juxtaposition with one another. This seems to anticipate the modernist literary interest in the "stream of consciousness" and a world made up not simply of a shared daytime plot, but also of multiple and only obscurely intercommunicating nights of inchoate desire and dreaming.

As Roger Scruton has argued, artistic modernism as a whole continued and radicalised the Wagnerian enterprise.[3] On the whole, formal religion was eschewed; yet equally disdained was the modern totalized and desacralised world. The desire was to make art a refuge and enclave for the hyper-specific symbol, form, or expression whose secrecy and difficulty ensured that it could not be banalized or functionalised by an all-devouring marketplace. In the case of music, this process has perhaps been carried to its furthest extreme; music especially permits an extreme degree of abstraction and formalisation. But the result of this, particularly with the rise of total serialism after the Second World War, has been to give the world of classical music the ethos of a small, diminishing sect, claiming to be able to hear beauties to which the public ear has remained tone-deaf.

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[2] Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's* Tristan and Isolde (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Nick Nesbitt, "Deleuze, Adorno and the Composition of Musical Multiplicity," in *Deleuze and Music*, eds., I. Buchanan and M. Swiboda (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 54–76.

[3] Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart, passim.*