



Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*

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SOME MIGHT SAY, possibly rhetorically, although when it comes to religion such beliefs can be firmly held, that there is a god-shaped hole somewhere inside each person, and that this explains why religion is such a persistent aspect of human life across the world. Others, rather than arguing that the human soul needs a god (or God), would prefer to champion the belief that it needs music, and that it is the affective nature of music that inspires faith in the supernatural—in other words, that music is an essential component of religion, or at the extreme point, music *creates* religion. Jonathan Arnold, the author of *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, is a Christian chaplain at a college at the University of Oxford, and would prefer to argue that music should serve religion, although his take is nuanced, not least because he recognizes the need to account for how music created for sacred purposes increasingly has a life as secular, concert repertoire as well as filling the airwaves from secular broadcasters. Arnold includes a smattering of psychology as he accounts for music's impact, although his choice of theory is highly selective and mixes theology with Eurocentric psychology. There is nothing wrong in this, but since my review is for an ethnological journal based in Asia, I need to explore what such a take can offer a broad readership.

Psychologists have long noted that the human body and its psyche reacts to musical stimuli, receiving them in the archipallium and through the limbic system, reacting instinctively, but then utilizing the “thinking” parts of the brain to interpret what is heard. Instinct is, of course, not readily open to reason, but processes of interpretation are socialized into us as part of a received culture. It is this that gives us the ability to apply reason to music. Music is the most plastic of arts, and therefore the most open to interpretation. But music can, remark SCHNECK and BERGER (2006, 71), drive the very organism that invents it, restoring balance, healing, and managing needs; the body can resonate with sound and, as many have argued, we can become “lost” in music. Even Charles Darwin believed that music (or singing) predated language in the development of humankind, but for two centuries the dogma of “art for art’s sake” has blurred the need to identify meaning in music, at least when considering the Western art music canon. Where music and religion are considered to belong together, and where a distinction is made between sacred and secular music, then music is routinely taken to serve religion. At this point, reasoning and interpretation are duty bound to

enter the fray: sacred music is held to interpret liturgy through programmatic tone painting, or by setting meaningful lyrics. In Europe, it is a commonplace that musicians are—or once were—required to serve their religious masters; the very word “performer” (or “professional musician”) can be pejorative, something that religious leaders and institutions hold up as threatening the requirement to serve, *a priori*, the godhead. Today we can readily observe the challenges that this throws up: musicians typically want to perform at the highest possible level and proficiency, not least so they can stay ahead of competition and ensure their economic survival. Again, religious faith is not necessarily expected of those who provide sacred music, as those familiar with church organists know only too well.

Arnold, in observing and exploring all this, makes himself heavily reliant on interviews. He carefully chooses his informants from those in Britain who compose, perform, or exercise oversight for sacred music, both old and new, from the Western art canon. Key among them are Harry Christophers, founder and conductor of *The Sixteen*, a widely acclaimed choral group; Peter Phillips, founder and director of a second celebrated choral group, *The Tallis Scholars*; Francis Steele, formerly a professional bass member with both groups; Stephen Farr and James O’Donnell, directors of music at London churches; James MacMillan and Robert Saxton, well-known composers; writer and intellectual Roger Scruton; and former Archbishop of Canterbury (that is, head of the Anglican communion), Rowan Williams. Scruton is a research fellow at an Oxford college, while Williams is master of a Cambridge college; these are serious commentators, all sharing a common background. Another composer also appears, the late Jonathan Harvey, representing a European Buddhist perspective, the counterpart to the Jewish Saxton, but both fade from view after the first chapter as Christian apologetics become increasingly central.

The last decade has seen ethnomusicologists move toward focusing on individual musicians in a way that matches much anthropology, witnessed, say, in Helen REES’s edited *Lives in Chinese Music* (2009), Sara LE MENESTREL’s *Des vies en musique* (2012), or my own collaborative work with individual musicians in Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Zimbabwe (e.g., HOWARD 2011). There is, though, a greater sense of a shared enterprise in Arnold’s text than in such ethnomusicological writing, and he allows those he talks with to lead, or to appear to lead, much of the theoretical discussion. The account hinges on the claim that composers in the past had solid Christian faith, but with Christianity now a choice in an increasingly secular society, composers who “out” themselves as Christians do so in deliberate and thoughtful ways. Certainly, European composers and many musicians in Renaissance and Baroque Europe had little choice but to be employed or commissioned by the church, and much the same applies to many religious institutions outside the European art tradition, but does this signal that the musicians held solid religious beliefs, or was their collaboration simply a reflection of the need to get on?

The limits that Arnold’s Christian orientation imposes are essentially no different than those imposed by many music psychology texts: Western art music remains at all times the musical material *sine qua non*, and its components—rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics, and structures—are what counts. Ethnomusicologists, including I suspect many of us who value the world we find beyond Europe and America, may well reject the particularity of much of his argument, but the primary issues are not uncommon: Who creates sacred music, and who, inside and outside the contexts of

ritual, performs it? Who listens to it? How is it mediated in our technological age, and why does it persist in having such a prominent place within our secular constructions of culture? How can it survive into a future in which notions of “traditional” religion will always be challenged as pre-modern rituals lose their meaning and technological mediations increase? These questions form, albeit in disguised ways, the subject matter of the six chapters in Arnold’s volume. The questions, though, are as valid for, say, the large rituals of East Asian Buddhism or Southeast Asian shamanism as they are for African spirit mediumship and the music of South Asian courts. Equally, giving pride of place to complex masses, and to the glorious antiphonal choral music of Europe’s Renaissance and Baroque periods, encourages us to question the superficiality of populist music, wherever it is found and studied. In this volume, Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School’s critiques of mass culture form the underpinning of the perspective, elaborated particularly by Roger Scruton in interview, but updated to include a rejection of New Age spiritualism as well as the tendency for more evangelical Christian churches to replace masses and complex settings of the liturgy with banal choruses that can be picked up and sung by anybody and everybody, endlessly and mindlessly, for seeming eons of time. Taken more broadly, the argument is that we should search for magnificence in the music of religious and cultural traditions and question whether scholarship should follow and reflect popular taste or, rather, seek to understand the ethereal qualities of music as art. This, certainly, is an argument that we should all consider, whatever religion and cultural tradition we work with.

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