

Praeludium

Du siehst, mein Sohn,
zum Raum wird hier die Zeit.
[Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*]

TIME AND SPACE, VISUAL and aural, are four of the fundamental coordinates through which we perceive and conceptualize our life. Seemingly, the members of each pair pertain to different, almost opposed domains: yet, the theory of relativity has taught us the possibility of conceiving Time as the fourth dimension of Space, and our bodily senses rarely work in isolation. Music is the art of sounds in time, but it is visually and spatially represented by musical scores. By observing them, time becomes space (as in Wagner's *Parsifal*), and can be viewed simultaneously in its unfolding. This experience may therefore become a symbol for the eternal present, i.e., the condition outside time, that transcends time, but which nonetheless embraces its totality.

This concept inspired the writing of the present book, which aims to demonstrate its theological fecundity. I will articulate my discourse in two Parts: each focuses on a distinct aspect and has a distinct approach, but both elaborate the same hypotheses and are deeply intertwined. Using a wide array of tools from a variety of disciplines, Part One discusses the implications of the idea that musical scores may by analogy symbolize the "eternal present." In Part Two, I will take the first pages of Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* as the starting point for a theological understanding in musical terms of the biblical Book of Genesis.

The topic I will be treating in Part One lies at the borders between theology and philosophy, music aesthetics and practice, but also touches upon such seemingly unrelated subjects as physics, history of art and the

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psychology of music, thus requiring a continuous shift in perspective. Though such shifts may challenge the reader's endurance, it is only by viewing the perspectives together that the concluding picture will emerge. Indeed, when consulting numerous sources on this topic, I realized that several scholars had, in their respective fields, provided the indispensable ground for my research, though—as far as I know—none had formulated it in these terms.¹

In order to ease the task of reading Part One, I will briefly sketch *how* its various sections intertwine with each other and how they contribute to the point I wish to make. I begin with “Time and the Eternal Present,” a brief summary of how Christian theologians and other thinkers have come to define the relationship between God and time as an “eternal present,” and what such a concept can entail. I will also discuss the history of visual representations of Time and how this phenomenon came to be represented in spatial terms. In chapter 2, “Musical Scores and Temporality,” I will turn to the history of musical notation, and to how the various forms of Western visualization of prescriptive or descriptive notations came to represent succession, duration, simultaneity and synchronicity. The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate how phenomena studied by psychologists of music and how the musicians' actual experience can provide a meaningful analogical representation of an “eternal present.” In chapter 3, “Music as a Syntax of Time,” I then argue that the structure of music, as represented by the score and/or as experienced by the musician or listener, is made intelligible through a system which renders musical events meaningful in their articulation in time. Special cases of musical notation will also be discussed, including graphic scores and some works by Iannis Xenakis. Subtly different views emerge from the subsequent discussion of Pierre Boulez's study of Paul Klee's paintings, which embody musical notation as a symbol for temporality, and from a distinctive but closely related view developed by Vasilij Kandinsky.

In chapter 4, “Observing the Score,” I discuss the information which scores as visual objects may transmit. This is complemented by a brief

1. The only trace I have found of a statement similar to the view proposed here (though the idea is not developed, particularly in its theological implications, and it remains at the stage of a metaphor) is in Pickover, *Time*, 41–42: “An observer existing outside of time, in a region called ‘hypertime’, can see the past and future all at once. In a strange sense, when we scan back and forth over a musical score we are like a hyperbeing who lives outside of time. . . . A musical score makes time solid. A musician can see past, present, and future all at once.”

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survey of how the depiction of musical scores in visual art, particularly in the domain of *vanitas* and still-life painting, has represented the flowing of time, its fixation through art, eternity (or eternalization), and simultaneity. The observation of a score, and the capability to digest the information it contains in a multidimensional navigation of time characterizes the processes of musical performance. The relationship between score and interpretation reveals the complex concept of temporality experienced by musicians. This variety of approaches contributes to the surfacing of the main points of Part One: that music symbolizes the ordering of aural events in time; that musical scores allow the simultaneous visualization of these events; and that this experience is a powerful human analogue to the transcendent reality of the eternal present.

Part Two develops the theological implications of Part One, rehearsing their significance in a reinterpretation of the Christian understanding of Creation, as seen through the lens of Tolkien's *Ainulindalë*. Chapters 5 ("Beholding God") and 6 ("Polyphonic Improvisations") discuss the beginning of this imaginative literary work, where a divine being firstly creates a court of spiritual powers, similar to the angels of the Christian tradition. The Godhead then imparts "knowledge" to these creatures, in the form of a "theme of music," inviting them to "adorn" this music freely. Their singing is monodic at first, and when they later learn to know their brethren, it becomes a polyphony. By showing how Tolkien's myth intertwines with the writings of numerous Christian theologians, musicians, and authors, and with the history of music in the Western Middle Ages as known by Tolkien, I will discuss the implications of a "musical" concept of this imparted knowledge and of this polyphonic singing: it is in the contemplation of God that the intelligent beings discover the truth about themselves, about their brethren and about Him, and this enables their creative freedom to flourish in the encounter between God's will and a creature's liberty. This leads to my thesis that the contemplation of God may be likened to a musical score, "read" by the heavenly musicians, and, at the same time, enabling them to improvise freely and spontaneously.

Chapter 7, "Discord and Dissonance," discusses Tolkien's account of the rebellion of the greatest of the "angels," who disrupts the heavenly concert by attempting to replace the divine theme with one of his own. Here too the theological content of Tolkien's myth substantially coincides with the Christian interpretation of the Fall of Lucifer. By narrating it through music, however, its symbolic value is enriched: the diabolic music brings

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discord and breaks the musical relationships, but it nonetheless can be absorbed and transformed by the divine composer. While God neither wills nor justifies the dissonances in the music of history, his capability to encompass them in his redemptive song is a manifestation of his providence, i.e., of the loving care with which he sustains the life of the created world and saves us. By faith, Christians believe that their individual stories and the world's collective history do make a beautiful music, though our experience as mortal beings does not allow us to contemplate and to understand it in full. Outside of time, though, the blessed spirits already fix their gaze in God, and, in the contemplation of his eternal present, they can see, as if concentrated in a single point, the marvellous unfolding of the entire song. This mystical experience is wonderfully told by the Italian poet Dante, whose personal story is both visually contemplated, and aurally perceived, by his deceased ancestor Cacciaguida in the *Commedia*.

Temporal events are therefore symbolized by musical events, whose succession is not haphazard but rather corresponds to the Composer's creativity and artistry; mortal beings can believe in faith that the "notes" of their lives possess a meaning (and a beautiful one) in God's Music, contemplated outside time by the blessed (chapter 8, "Creation and Subcreation"). And so it follows that the act of making music represents an almost theological undertaking, as it posits the goodness, beauty, and intelligibility of the universe. Artists respond in a particularly clear fashion to the divine calling to creativity, which is foundational for human beings made in the image of their Creator; but they also encourage those who will listen to their music and read their books to weave their own individual stories as histories of salvation. Human creativity thus becomes a powerful form of announcement of the *euangelion*, of the good news of the Gospel, and allows us to glimpse, albeit for a fleeting moment, the full score of the symphony in God's Eternal Present.

By now it will be clear that I am writing from a perspective grounded in Christian theology. Although my main conclusions will be based on this religious perspective, I hope that the journey will enrich readers who do not share my Christian worldview, but who may find such a perspective culturally interesting. I have cited from and made use of a variety of disciplines, with a rather synchronistic approach which would be inadmissible in a historical work or in an essay in literary criticism; however, since each approach seemed to shed a particular light on one of the topics I wished to discuss, their causal connections are frequently less relevant than the

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perspectives they offer. At the same time, and for the same reason, I have not aimed at a systematic thoroughness in the treatment of the sources: I have chosen selectively, drawing from the inexhaustible well of Christian culture in order to let my argument appear more clearly.

The primary aim of this book is to contribute to a theological understanding of music and of its notation as a powerful symbol for a transcendent and consoling reality: the supreme beauty of God, his providence, and our final destiny as singers in His eternal symphony.