

**MUSIC and FAITH**

# **Evocations of eternity in and through the world of music**

By Benjamin Ho

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”

Ludwig van Beethoven once famously said “music should strike fire from the heart of man, and brings tears from the eyes of woman”. Indeed, music has the ability to convey meanings and express emotions that cannot be carried by the spoken word alone. Many of us, knowingly or unknowingly, have had our lives touched by music one way or another; it influences our moods, our appetites, our spending habits, even our relationships. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine a day – let alone life itself – without music, such is the pervasive nature of music that it speaks to us in a multitude of ways – from the seemingly trivial to the thoroughly profound - without which human life would be unbearably boring, even lifeless (imagine a departmental store devoid of music or a wedding procession conducted in silence).

More importantly through music, we are able to engage with realities that are not perceived by our visual senses alone, that is, in a reality that extend beyond spatial reaches, one that is tied to the concept of time – and eternity.

In the words of Augustine, eternity is “whatever has not been made and yet exists, has nothing in it which was not previously there”. As Christians, we believe that God is eternal and self-existing and that He sustains the created world through his Word, which will never pass away (Heb 1:3; Luke 21:33). In relating God’s eternal character to us, the Teacher tells us that God has “set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11); in other words, man, created in God’s image and likeness, are fashioned to be both the image-bearer of our Creator and in which the deepest desires of our hearts find their true fulfillment in.

How then can music inform our view of eternity? To what extent are we able to relate with things eternal through the medium of music – one that is primarily composed of material particles (sound waves oscillating in space-time) and without which the making of music would be impossible. As Duke University professor Jeremy Begbie points out, “music is a temporal art through and through. It happens in time and it shapes time. It is time-embedded, full of change and motion”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Baker Academic, 2007, p. 168).

In my view, part of the reason we struggle to come to grasp with the idea of eternity is the fact that we often conceive of eternity as a “life-after-death” existence located in a distant future far removed from our present lives. I disagree. Indeed, many Christians have been more influenced by medieval art and drama concerning their view of eternity in which we become free-floating disembodied souls moving in a timeless and voidless space that we sometimes term as “heaven”. Such theological ignorance, the renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, leads Christians to believe “that the whole point of the Christian faith is to follow Jesus away from earth to heaven and stay there forever”. As a result, many Christians are unable to articulate a theology of the present in which we are required to participate in the affairs of the world, in and through our bodies. “As long as we see Christian hope in terms of ‘going to heaven’, of a salvation that is essentially *away from the world*”, Wright observes, we would be unable to reconcile the two questions of “what is the ultimate Christian hope” and “what hope is there for change, rescue, new possibilities within the world in the present”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, to imagine salvation as purely “going to heaven and avoiding hellfire” is a gross misunderstanding of what our salvation entails. By doing so, not only we abdicate the responsibilities of being God’s good stewards on this earth, we also leave ourselves shortchanged (in terms of fulfilling our God-given potential). In other words, we run the danger of becoming so heavenly minded to be of no earthly use.

In light of this, I argue that music – by virtue of its relationship with time – provides us with an art form whose thoroughly temporal and physical nature allows us to engage with the most profoundest of all realities: eternity.

To see how this is so, we need to first understand a fundamental aspect of music, that is, its *relational quality*. According to Begbie, “musical notes become meaningful and pleasurable for us, not primarily because they direct our attention to objects that they refer to or represent, but through their relation to one another”.<sup>3</sup> Through a series of notational relations and patterns, individual notes become meaningful as they are being related to other notes – in musical space and time – and in the process of doing so, assume a musical character that is markedly different from an individual note expressed in isolation. This idea then, that music is primarily “sounds in relation” has several important implications for our faith.

First and foremost, as human beings, we are being created in the image of God (*imago dei*). Among other characteristics we may be endowed with, *it is the capacity to relate with our Creator and his created world that sets us apart from the rest of God’s creation*. This is of immense significance in the modern world in which our lives become increasingly individualistic, isolated from the bonds of the wider community. The late British theologian Colin Gunton, in his critique of individualism, argues that the latter, being a “non-relational creed...teaches that I do not need my

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<sup>2</sup> *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008, p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> Begbie, 2007, p. 54

neighbor in order to be myself".<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one trap of modern living is in the idea that we – by means of technological tools – have become more connected and consequentially, less lonely or isolated. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Technologically advanced countries like Japan and the United States have frequently reported high levels of suicide rates and unhappiness. *Indeed, in our friendships, we may be quantitatively connected with many without ever being qualitatively related with any.*

In light of this modern tragedy where the glue that binds social life together no longer holds, I contend that music has much to teach about the relational character of our lives in which only by participating and relating within a wider community can we be truly ourselves.

[To be continued]

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<sup>4</sup> *The One, The Three and The Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity.* (Cambridge, 1993, p. 32).