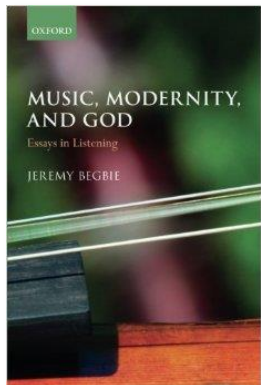


# [Review] *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening*, by Jeremy Begbie

KATHERINE H. MOREHOUSE

Katherine H. Morehouse currently serves as the chair of the Multi-Ethnic Music Studies Department at Liberty University, which houses the Master of Arts in Ethnomusicology, a Master's Certificate in Music in World Cultures, and the Bachelor of Music in World Cultures. Besides teaching, she also enjoys making music with her family and helping lead worship at Blue Ridge Community Church. She and her husband are currently raising four children in Evington, Virginia.



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In this succinct yet rich collection of eight essays, Jeremy Begbie skillfully explores the way that music can inform our theological processing of “modernity.” Begbie is interested in how discussions of music can reflect theologies and “ways of talking/thinking” about God. His signature approach of theologically questioning individual pieces, composers, and even smaller samples of music makes Begbie one of the most innovative scholars in music and theology. The book provides the reader with a wide breadth of examples that demonstrate how this type of theological inquiry might be applied to any piece of music in the world—though Begbie limits his scope to the ecclesial and art music of western Europe. For ethnomusicologists, ethnodoxologists, and arts practitioners working in Christian contexts around the world, *Music, Modernity, and God* offers important contributions about the way that music can “mean,” the ways that text and multimedia interrelate, and how a piece of music can yield theological and cultural insights through deep questioning. The reader may wonder whether any trace of God can be found in Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*, or whether theological interpretations should be retrofitted to works that may not have originally been perceived as theological expressions, but Begbie seems to take pleasure in playing with these idiosyncrasies and seeming conflicts. Just as a musical piece becomes “new” again each time it is interpreted through a new cultural lens or in a new context, so Begbie adopts the epistemic context and lens of “modernity” to bring new life to a familiar canon.

The introductory chapter proposes a welcome definition of the elusive term *modernity* and a very brief history of ideas concerning the term. Modernity in this sense doesn't refer to the *modernism* of a music history survey class—that era of music created during the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries—but to a worldview shift that began in the late Renaissance and Reformation periods (1500's–1600's) and continues today. This worldview, according to Begbie, entails

A cluster of attitudes and mindsets inextricably bound up with social and cultural practices, which include, for example, particularly strong and prominent concepts of autonomy and human freedom; the notion of humans as standing “over against” their physical environment; linear understandings of time and associated notions of progress; the privileging of a distinctive form of reasoning allied to bureaucratization,



technological mastery, and industrialization; and an inclination to favor post-religious, even anti-theological, single “metanarratives.” (4)

Chapters two through six unpack these ideas. Chapter two explores the use of music in the Reformation, using Calvin’s and Luther’s theologies of music as evidence of changing cosmologies in society. Begbie views Luther’s writings on music and theology as representative of the pre-modern era, and Calvin’s as representing the modern. The point is well argued, though the reader might also wonder if perhaps the church at that time was shaping culture more than the culture (that is, early modernism) was shaping the church. The length of the essay does not allow for a full treatment of Calvin’s or Luther’s commentary on music, but it is a wealth of primary source quotes on the two men’s understandings of music and theology.

Chapter three focuses on J. S. Bach, and is a response to John Butt’s analysis of modernity in Bach’s compositions: namely, dealing with the newly altered tunings for fixed instruments, which made new tonalities possible and reflected the modernist idea that nature can and should be altered in the name of progress. Chapter four continues this theme of the “natural,” exploring natural theology as it is conceived by and argued between Jean-Philippe Rameau, the foremost composer of the French Enlightenment, and his contemporary, philosopher and author Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Chapter five opens a deeper discussion of language and music, with Begbie suggesting that German Romantic composers and critics allowed music to transcend text, simply because it could convey feeling that was open-ended, not prescribed. This was a challenge to the concepts of *normativity* and *finitude*. As if to contrast the concepts of the finite and limits of the normative, chapter six is a musical response to the concept of freedom, from and with God and with others. In fact, hidden in the small unassuming section called “Sound Space” (and a following section called “Interpenetration”) is a bit of apologetics—a simple, effective metaphor for the nature of God. It is perhaps the most convincing portion of the book, attesting to the ability of music to lend insight to theology. A brief retelling of it here does no justice to Begbie’s exquisite application of the concept. At its root the concept imagines a scenario of two distinct pitches played on a piano, both sounds filling a space with measurable sound waves; yet the point is not how it works, but that the sound is “heard” in one place: that is, the way that the sound is experienced—full and complete, without specific origin, “edgeless,” tones sounding both inside and separate from one another simultaneously.

In chapters seven and eight, Begbie further explores a philosophical discussion of “language” as a thread that ties together his discussions of seemingly unrelated treatments of works ranging from Calvinist and Lutheran hymnody to Mozart and Bach and other composers in Western art music traditions, from chapters two through six. The author builds on Nicholas Cook’s study, *Analyzing Musical Multimedia* (1998), in order to build a strong argument against “pure music.” He suggests instead that music always “means” because of its denotations and connotations, both in the texts and in the contexts in which it communicates. This seems to contradict several remarks from the introduction, in which Begbie’s intent is to allow music the “opacity of its own voice”; but it is a necessary contradiction, if perhaps leaning to more of a “postmodern” bent than “modern.”

Although Begbie seems to discount postmodernity as either a continuation of modernity or an implosion of it, I believe that ideas about postmodernism's interplay with music and theology may enrich the ideas contained within these chapters. My criticism should be read as a request for a sequel, since the author intentionally limits his scope to modernity. But I would be interested to see how postmodern approaches to musical epistemologies—phenomenology, discursive models, multivocality, and so on—can shed light on the topics that modernity cannot answer satisfactorily: namely, the affective or spiritual realm. By that I am referring to that elusive element of music that cannot be conceptualized or effectively communicated by language, but which is nonetheless communicated and transmitted through (or at least during) musical performance. In my teaching, I'm always trying to get at that elusive phenomenon of spiritual experience and embeddedness of theology as it affects (and can be observed in) performance. This is something that Begbie's approach might offer the field of ethnodoxology. Perhaps much valuable music-cultural information could be gleaned from searching musical texts for theological components beyond simply the lyrics.

Broadening outward, ethnomusicologists, who sometimes draw from communication theory and linguistic approaches in studying musical genres and traditions, might also find the discussion on linguistics intriguing. Though not taking a specifically linguistic approach, Begbie examines modernism from a modernist perspective—that is, viewing music and performance as texts that can be “read” through the lens of modernism. This is not unlike some of the approaches from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology (Geertz), performance theory (Schechner and Turner), ethnomusicology (Friedson, Titon, Charles Seeger), and semiotics (Laskewicz), all of which offered deep insight into the analysis of musical expression as text, as they played with the metaphor of music as language or communication. As a contribution to musicology and the theology of music, *Music, Modernity, and God* is a formidable example of interdisciplinary theory, wielded with an academic rigor that adds a freshness to old works, helping readers to see God, theology, and themselves more clearly.

## Bibliography

Butt, John. 2010. *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cook, Nicholas. 1998. *Analysing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.