Music as a Door to the Holy

Don E. Saliers and Emily A. Saliers
Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Abstract
When we reflect on music and theology, we find that questions about God and religious practice are also questions about deep human emotions: awe, wonder, fear, grief, sorrow, confusion, joy, hope, gratitude, and ecstatic praise. Music can sound the language of the heart before God and neighbor, into mystery and suffering.

Keywords
Divine Consolation; Doxology; Indigo Girls; Music and Theology; Praise; Lament; Sacred Sound; Ritual

Introduction
As daughter and father, Emily and I have been holding a long conversation about music in our lives. This is a life-long dialogue, having come to expression in a collaboratively written book, A Song to Sing, A Life to Live.1 There we sought to make a case for music as a spiritual discipline, examining where music has taken us and how it has shaped our experiences of life, justice, and faith. This essay follows on some of the exchanges in that book, as we continue to explore themes and fresh questions about music and that most elusive quality called “holiness.” What has Saturday night to do with Sunday morning in church? How can very different musical experiences give us glimpses of what is sacred in this world? What is it about some words set to music that can open human beings to awareness of the divine?

Music as Praise
We begin with a story from Emily and her three sisters’ childhood. We were living in the inner city of New Haven, Connecticut. The neighborhood children would gather at our apartment from time to time for a musical game, such as a hand-clapping or jump-rope. We reminisced about the days when a single jump rope would appear, and the children would gather in a circle to learn a song and a dance. On special days, two ropes constituted “double dutch,” as they called it. In either event the older children would teach and coach the young ones in an improvised song, such as: “Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black, with silver buttons, buttons, buttons, all

1 Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice (San Francisco: Wiley, 2005).
down her back, back, back.” One by one they entered the twirling ropes to hop and skip to the song’s rhythm, then dance away to the circle. Emily and I both remember how, if someone missed a step, the children would say something encouraging like, “That’s alright, honey, try it again…you can do it.” Gradually the younger ones got better and better, imitating the more skilled ones. The song and the skipping dance became a circle of inclusion and delight.

This remains a vivid image of a kind of natural praise; and for me (Don) an image of a good liturgy. Here were children performing a sung ritual that had been passed down through time and across cultures. When it worked best there emerged a kind of blessedness in the rhythm and the song. All these years later, Emily and her sisters remember those childhood friends’ faces and that delightful energy.

For Don that image of the children’s circle game is evoked each year during the Easter Vigil at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Atlanta, Georgia.2 At the end of the Easter Vigil, worshipers gather in a circular dance around the altar. For many participants, there is an awareness of the depth of this ritual action and its Arabic and Jewish origins, now sung to a resurrection chant, “Alleluia!” Music, even in its simplest forms, has this strange power to transport us.

Music Represents Us

We are both practicing musicians. Emily is a singer-song writer, and Don is a liturgical musician. We make music in very different contexts. One performs in rock concerts and recording studios, the other in churches, synagogues, and chamber music recitals. This allows us to listen to one another across generational and cultural lines, as well as to different styles and genres. Emily has helped Don come to appreciate music that he was not naturally drawn to, for example: Black urban and rap. Despite Don’s initial concern about misogyny and violence in some of the lyrics, Emily insisted that Don hear the pain and the hope in some of those songs. Soon we found ourselves making a connection to songs of protest against injustice and oppression in the message of the biblical prophets. As Emily has remarked more than once: “If you dislike some people’s music, it is most likely because you dislike them out of misguided judgment.” If you come to love another culture’s music, you cannot help but begin to respect and love the people who sing and play it. “Music represents us,” Emily adds.

2 This Easter Vigil ritual was borrowed, I believe, from St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco.
For good and for ill, music shapes and gives expression to what people believe and experience of the world. Explicitly or implicitly, music has the power to evoke a theological view of things: what counts as “just” or “unjust”; what words and musical settings convey meaning in matters of life and death, beauty and terror, doxology and lament, God and the world. In this way we are always discovering echoes between what may be “written on subway walls,” and the “the sounds of silence.”3 We often find that certain biblical texts—especially the Psalms—also speak as cries to God. Psalms of lament sing of loneliness and desolation: “You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness” (Ps. 88:18). There are, we are convinced, many more resonances between current songs of protest and complaint and psalms that ask questions of God, such as: “How long, O Lord, will you hide your face?” (Psalm 13:1).

Questions about our music making are questions about what affects us most deeply. That is, in reflecting together about music and theology, we come to pay attention to the fact that questions about God and religious practice are also questions about deep human emotions: awe, wonder, fear, grief, sorrow, confusion, joy, hope, gratitude, and ecstatic praise. Music can sound the language of the heart at full stretch before God and neighbor, into mystery and suffering, which are, as Robert Shaw once observed, the two criteria for the creation of great music.4

Of course we both agree that a lot of the music we consume is simply for entertainment or pleasure. Not all music can reach down into the deepest aspects of life, nor is it intended to do so. Our point here is to search for and to pay attention to how music and song do in fact touch our loves and griefs, our desires and our hopes in such a way as to open us to the reality of tragic and redemptive aspects of life.

Emily tells of the time she was driving and had to pull over to listen to a symphonic piece playing on the radio, because it was so moving. It was the “14th Variation” from Edward Elgar’s Enigma Variations. The music, with its moody suspensions and resolutions, became for her the literal storm that was gathering outside the car. “It was a moment of transcendence for me,” she said. Elgar’s music evoked for her something quite unexpected in the middle of a busy day. We agreed that this happens to many people, even to those who may not be fond of so-called “classical music.” For some, music from a film score may evoke a sense of longing that cannot quite be named. Hymns and music associated with someone we have loved and lost often accumulate this kind of significance. When Don was conducting a study of singing practices by congregations several years ago, people reported their “body memory” of persons and places that are encoded in certain hymns. Some spoke of the sound of a violin or cello evoking a sense of prayerfulness, even though they had no verbal expression for it.

Both Emily and Don also know the power of music for someone who is held captive by dementia. In our own family it was often the singing or playing of a familiar hymn or piece of music that called mother and wife to be present, if only for a moment. We do not take such a thing for granted. This is more than a happy accident; it tells us that music also can be a voice embedded in a human life, a voice that does more than entertain—even to the point of invoking a shared presence of love.

Music as Lament

Don recalls hearing Robert Shaw conducting Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem for the first time. In that work Britten sets Wilfred Owen’s World War I poems against texts of the Mass for the Dead. At the point of the Offertory, the music retells the story of Abram and Isaac: “So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, / And took the fire with him, and a knife.” Young Isaac observes the preparations for the sacrifice and asks where the lamb for this offering might be. “Then Abram

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4 Robert Shaw often spoke of these terms, first found in his Harvard lectures. For examples, see The Robert Shaw Reader, ed. Dean Robert Blocker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
bound the youth with belts and straps, / and builded parapets and trenches there, / And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.” Then a musical shift interposes the voice of a divine messenger who bids Abram: “Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him. Behold, a ram…Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.” At this point a children’s choir joins the baritone and tenor soloists. The children begin to chant the ancient *Offertorium* text from the Latin Mass (*Hostias et preces tibi Domine laudis offerimus*… [“Sacrifices and prayers we offer, Lord, to you with praise…bring them from death to life”]). Unlike the biblical ending of the story, there follows a terrifying text, sung by the two soloists: “But the old man would not so, but slew his son…And half the seed of Europe, one by one.” In Britten’s musical intensification of the unspeakable, both soloists, in broken musical lines, repeat the phrase “one by one” over the children’s prayers.5

This piece is a challenge even on first hearing, and it intensifies over time. A terrible scene rendered exquisitely by the music echoes in our memory long after the music has ended. The layering of musical lines, the irony of text and Mass structure, and the instrumentation fuse into a sonic event greater than the words alone. Here is music as theology, raising the most difficult questions about God and the world, as relevant today as ever. Britten’s musical art forces us to confront that which is nearly unutterable.

Emily remarks in response: “I hear deep lament in Leonard Cohen’s song, ‘Hallelujah.’”6 We played that song at the graveside when our sister was buried because it spoke so much to her life, and so much of her in death.” Music can give us language when may not have words to express our grieving and sorrow. This is of course, what the biblical psalms do, as well. The singer Bono and his band U-2 often echo the psalms of lament in their music, taking non-church audiences into the orbit of explicitly religious sources. Popular songs can bring us to the edge of the feeling of loss. Folk traditions tend to have emotional patterns that open us to the deeper aspects of love and loss, of thankfulness and hope. This is, of course, especially true of the traditions of African-American Spirituals. These songs were born out of a history of suffering and captivity, threat and promise. “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” comes to express a trans-cultural sense of abandonment and loss. When hearing that music we may imagine current refugees and children bereft of parents. The words and the song carry a specific people’s expression that evokes a deeply human set of emotions. Even for the non-believer, the question of God is evoked. “Why is this? This should not be so!” This is a cry in the world. So the counterpoint between the “unholy” and the “holy” emerges. Music can take us to the gap between the “is” of the world and the “ought to be” of religious and ethical hope. Both of us are committed to encouraging this sensibility in our different domains.

**Music and Divine Consolation**

Don is also drawn to the “Requiem” by French composer Gabriel Fauré.7 His setting does not include the terrifying tensions found in Britten’s “War Requiem”; rather, Fauré’s listeners are embraced by a profoundly elegiac and serene sense of consolation. The word *requiem* (rest/peace) is the first and last word of the piece. Fauré does not aim for dramatic confrontation (as do other famous nineteenth-century requiems, such as those by Berlioz, Verdi, and even the earlier Mozart). Rather, we experience restraint. The piece is scored for two solo voices, a choir in four parts, a modest complement of strings, and occasional trumpet and horn.

Philippe Fauré, writing four years after his father’s death, includes a telling phrase in his description of the work: “[I]t comes about that Fauré, unwilling to describe heaven, yet gives us a glimpse of it, because…he has eliminated from prayer its passionate element—that is, terror.” Here is musical theology for the bereaved, but it is not sentimental or unrealistic about death. Loss and perishing

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7 Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924), *Requiem*, Opus 48.
are not to be denied, as we hear the “Pie Jesu” (soprano, harp, and lower strings). The concluding “In Paradisum” has no trace of torment. As one commentator has observed, “Fauré’s Requiem…is perhaps, more than any other, a Requiem without the Last Judgment; the terrors of the after life are hardly more than touched upon.”

Could we say that Britten’s musical theology holds the terror, and Faure’s the beauty and consolation? Not quite. Britten, like Fauré, does not focus on the terrors of the afterlife. Both composers hold beauty and terror together, even though they present very different aesthetic and religious viewpoints. Britten’s music, like Fauré’s, also offers a form of consolation, composed as it was after the end of the Second World War and performed in view of the bombed-out ruins of Coventry Cathedral. This is music arising out of devastation. Fauré’s composition, coming shortly after the death of both his parents, attends to ritual prayer in the process of grief. Taken together they have much to teach us about music and the world of theology in the face of suffering, death, and the human condition.

Music as Expression of the Holy

Music is overtly theological in hymns and psalms, and also in some of the most simple and enduring songs, such as “What Wondrous Love is This, O My Soul.” In the music of African American Spirituals (discussed above), the song lines come directly from slavery’s cry of the heart. Eileen Guenther’s recent book explores how slave narratives and spirituals emerged from the suffering and the hope of those who wrote of their experience.

There is an early Indigo Girls’ song of Emily’s that we have often discussed. Emily admits that “History of Us” began as a love song, but moved well beyond that genre. It was composed, she says, on a family trip in which we bounced in a VW bus around parts of France and Germany. In it are images of Paris, the mountains in Switzerland, war ruins, and cathedrals. Don did not hear the song until months after the trip, but the effect was both one of memory and of voicing something of the Holy. In and through all these adventurous images, a refrain keeps sounding: “Let us love while these moments are still called today; ‘til time makes history of us.” In and through how we journey through our own lives in space and time, we are called to love. Sometimes, Don wishes our churches could hear the poignancy and the passion about love and mortality that I hear in that song.

Emily knows that Don works with biblical texts all the time, especially the psalms. We agree that in whatever venue and in whatever musical idiom, we are always searching for a way to sound the deeper rhythms of lament and doxology. As one of Emily’s favorite (and Don’s, as well, now) lyrics by Violeta Parra speaks: “Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto” (Thank you to life, that has given me everything). Music is a language that can sound gratitude for life in such a way that it becomes, even for non-religious persons, a threshold to the Holy.

As our discussions unfold, we always move to how the music is performed. While Don gravitates toward well-trained classical performances, Emily is often drawn to more natural, untrained voices. We often have discussed the difference between a “polished” vocal version of a singer like Renée Flemming and the natural, authentic sound of Bessie Smith singing the blues. Both convey human desire to lament suffering in life. They are remarkably different in how they express the words, yet it is possible to understand how qualities of the performance of each piece of music approaches the domain of “sacred sound.” This is especially so when the text occupies the space between how the world is, and how it “ought to be.” Human desire for justice and for a world transformed from suffering and fragmentation opens a threshold to questions of holiness.

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8 Norman Suckling, Fauré (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1946), 176.
9 Eileen Guenther, In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals (St. Louis: MorningStar Music, 2016).
Conclusion

We conclude with four proposals that may suggest further explorations of “sacrality.” Moving beyond conventional contrasts between “sacred” and “secular” styles of sound, it is crucial to listen for the silences that particular music evokes. We attribute to music and song a sense of the sacred when:

1. Music confers upon human words addressed to the divine its originating deep silence and mystery. This makes music a potentially contemplative practice.
2. Music is intimately related to the narrative quality of our experience of human life in its fullness. We “hear” in and through the music our own temporality, mortality, our hopes and our fears, our joys and deepest loves. The sound of the human voice is thus primordial.
3. In approaching the inexpressible, music has the capacity to awaken what is most valuable, and most intensely real—opening the soul and what is most revelatory of what lies just beyond human articulation.
4. Music can embody our desire for experiencing what is both human and transcendent—personally, socially, and indeed, the “music of the spheres.”

Occasionally we discern when the songs of earth and heaven meet. There are times and places when music and song together reveal more than a beautiful sound. One such occasion occurred for Don in 1985 during an ecumenical gathering outside of Geneva, Switzerland and the Orthodox Center in Chambezy. There were people participating in the Orthodox Holy Week with liturgies from countries that were then behind the “Iron Curtain”—from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Others were from Ethiopia and several English-speaking countries. All were invited to attend the Easter Vigil in one of several churches grouped together. Those of us in the seminar moved to and from the French-speaking Greek Orthodox and the Russian Orthodox liturgies.

I chose to spend most of the night with a small expatriate Romanian assembly. I did not understand the language, but the sound of the chant and the folk-based hymns carried me through the lengthy liturgy. Then, after midnight, as each community concluded its services, all of us poured out of the buildings into the chill, starry night singing in several languages, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” Bells sounded in the Easter morning air. It was as though we stood—from so many different cultures, languages, and Christian traditions—at the very center of the cosmos, singing and receiving the song in which heaven and earth were embraced.

All this is what led Martin Luther to claim that, next to the very Word of God, music is the greatest gift to humankind. For us music is an instrument that—however indirectly or ambivalently—expresses, explores, and interrogates our humanity at full stretch before the Holy Source of all being.