

music as an exegetical act?

John Ferguson

YES, THE TITLE OF THESE MUSINGS ENDS WITH A QUESTION mark. Speculation and disagreement over the evocative, provocative power of music as a communicative medium is, of course, perennial. Nevertheless, I believe that music has enormous potential to communicate, to unpack and interpret ideas, indeed to function exegetically. As a church musician, this cognitive dimension of my art has always fascinated and frightened me—fascinated because as composer or interpreter (performer) I'm able to communicate my ideas and understandings as I make music. But it has frightened me for the same reasons. I would be the first to admit that what I've just asserted—that music has enormous potential both to communicate and to develop ideas—is not accepted by all persons, perhaps not even all musicians, and for many there are limits to this interpretive, exegetical dimension of music. Here I'd like to explore the exegetical dimensions of music, experiment a bit with some of the possibilities, and then provide a specific deconstruction of a setting of the *Magnificat*, a composition that was produced specifically for this Lilly Fellows Program national conference and with this talk in mind.

To begin, let me identify a few fundamentals of my thinking about music as exegetical art. I think of music as a rhetorical art form in the sense that it is a kind of language complete with its own system of grammar and concepts that are unpacked through a systematic study of music theory, a part of every undergraduate music major's experience. Music is not specific in the way that words can be, but it does have the potential to communicate ideas and, for performers or composers, part of its communicative potential is unlocked by an understanding of how music is organized and how it functions.

Scholars considering music's expressive capabilities often separate music into two categories: *absolute music* and *programmatic music*. Absolute music is pure, organized sound. We experience it and react to it depending upon how it sounds to our own experiential being. It cannot be specific in the way that programmatic music can be. Programmatic music has a story that accompanies it. For example, in the storm movement from *William Tell*, the wind blows up, then the rain begins. Next there is thunder, increasingly violent. Finally, the thunder and rain subside,

and there is calm after the storm. (An excerpt from William Tell is played.)

Music with sung text is a special kind of programmatic music. Here, because words interact with musical gestures, music can become more specific and can paint a reasonably specific picture. An example: Sunrise in "Oh Day Full of Grace" (a recorded example of a musical "sunrise" from F. Melius Christiansen's "O Day Full of Grace.") Certainly this is an example of music as exegetical art: a specific kind of sunrise—a wondrous, celestial sunrise—is presented, though there are, of course, other types of sunrises.

It is time for a parenthesis: The challenge to the composer of programmatic music is to be cautious lest he or she be too specific. Last week during our Wednesday daily chapel, Susan Bauer, the choreographer for the dance setting of Psalm 23 that was shared at the vespers service last night, observed that the artist needs to be careful about becoming too literal. She encouraged a more abstract approach to choreography. In the same way, being too literal in a musical setting risks turning the musical setting into a parody and for composer and performer this fine line is a tightrope to be negotiated carefully.

Let's return to my fundamentals. Absolute music, and not just programmatic music, can be exegetical to a surprising, even an amazing, degree. Since my passion is church music, congregational as well as choral, we will explore this exegetical potential in absolute music.

Can a tune, in and of itself, convey a spirit or make a statement? Let's try some experiments with some familiar hymns, "Amazing Grace," and "Joy to the World." (The audience sings each text to its traditional tune and then, reverses, singing each text to the other's tune.) Now, we do have a problem here. We know these tunes in relation to specific texts. It is easy to propose that our understanding of the *geist*, the spirit, the nature of these tunes is so bound up in our associations with specific texts that we cannot make an impartial assessment of the nature of the tune. Our objectivity seems to have been destroyed by experience.

Let's try some other examples. First, "When in Our Music God is Glorified." (The audience sings this text with the tune ENGELBERG as it appears in With One Voice 802. The audience then sings the text with the tune FREDERICK-TOWN, Lutheran Book of Worship 555.) Note how with

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ENGELBERG the hymn seems more proud, with the other tune more humble, especially because the musical line for the Alleluia refrain “bows down” rather than ascends, as in the first tune. Now consider “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Compare our stereotypic way of singing this text and tune to recasting the tune as black gospel. In our original way the “friend” seems more like a soft, cuddly teddy bear; sung as black gospel, Jesus, our friend, seems more like a strong, sturdy lion—a protector.

Another consideration which has always fascinated me is that music is one of the arts that is experienced with a mediator, a person in the middle, as it were. The audience responds immediately to the painter’s work, but there is a performer in between the composer’s artwork and the audience. An implication of this, I think, is that a composer may set out to exegete a text, to paint a musical picture, but that process relies upon the performers for completion. The performers also interpret (sometimes unwittingly) the text, changing the hues and colors of the picture.

A PERFORMER’S RESPONSIBILITY IS, THUS, ENORMOUS. WE all have experienced hearing a set of numbers on the telephone—lifeless, clearly done by machine; all of us have heard a Scripture passage read by someone who has no idea what the words mean—it’s as if someone knows how to pronounce a language perfectly but has no idea what the words mean to convey. In the same way some performances reveal that the performers don’t understand the music; they haven’t considered (in the case of music with text) the implications of that text in relation to the musical setting of the text.

Music didn’t start out that way. The mediator, the person in the middle, is a relatively recent development in art music or much traditional Church Music. Over most of music’s history, the composer was the performer, either as singer or instrumentalist or as conductor. Today the composer lets go. Since no performance instructions in a score can be totally exhaustive, the composer must let go and trust the performers, invite them to collaborate in bringing an expressive construct to life.

Now, let’s move from these more general considerations to a specific application, a case study in exegetical composition, a Magnificat for a worship service during a Lilly Conference. To set the stage, I’d like to read a poem by Gardner McFall:

The News

She was going about an ordinary day,
pondering dinner, washing a dish,
or sweeping the floor. Maybe
she was standing in the garden
or had come in from the garden
to sit by the window and rest.
Perhaps she had taken up a book

or remembered the unfinished sewing
when she encountered an angel
in the middle of the room.

Of course, she was shocked,
though the angel offered a host
of assurances. Whatever she thought,
she didn’t hang her head in chagrin,
collapse in a rattled heap,
or race from the house. Neither
did she act like she’d won the lottery
and could lord it over everyone,

but, no doubt, picked up the sewing,
the book, the broom, or the dish
in which she glimpsed her reflection,
a woman without any special features
except for the yellow nimbus now
hovering around her head, someone
who didn’t even try to strike
a deal with the messenger,
though she was certainly going to
give up a lot being part of this plan.

The story of the Magnificat as told in the Gospel of Luke has always moved and fascinated me. Theologians suggest that Mary was a young woman; the poem just heard reminds us of the ordinariness of this person who suddenly discovers that God has great plans for her. She travels to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. Elizabeth is overwhelmed and cries out, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Mary, also overwhelmed by these momentous happenings, bursts into song, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

As one considers this canticle, at least two major questions arise. First, there is a kind of tension in the text. It is partially a song of praise—*My soul magnifies the Lord*—yet partially a profound statement about social justice—*God has put down the mighty and exalted the humble*. How is it that this young woman speaks with such profundity? Perhaps she grew up knowing such words from the Psalms of the Old Testament and the song of Hannah and her faith experience just welled up in her and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it just poured out. Or, Luke wanted to make some points and put them in Mary’s voice.

Either way, this poem presents a challenge for someone who sets it to music. Is it an essay addressing significant societal issues? Or is it the response of a stunned teenager, flabbergasted and anxious to tell the news that she is going to have a baby?

The second issue, the second question for the composer to address, is the scope of the piece. There are many wonderful, larger settings of the Magnificat. In a useful little book, *The Magnificat—Musicians as Biblical*

Interpreters, Samuel Terrieu does a wonderful job of analyzing some of these larger settings that, in today's church music practice, I consider to be more concert settings than liturgical settings.

However, because the Magnificat was chosen as a canticle to be sung during one of the daily monastic offices, smaller, liturgical settings have been produced over the centuries, probably numbering in the thousands. Yet, many of these settings—especially those in English, most of which come from the English Anglican cathedral/collegiate choral tradition—are too difficult for most church choirs to tackle.

Now, in addition to Evening Prayer, its original liturgical “home,” the Magnificat appears in the ecumenical lectionary during Advent, yet another opportunity for it to be sung at worship in a liturgical setting, if the setting is compact enough to work as an element in a larger liturgical construct. So we have two considerations: (1) How do we approach the text—is it essentially a joyful song of praise or will we emphasize the profound social implications of the text? And (2) for whom do we set the text—will it be difficult and performed primarily by professionals or more accessible for many more typical choirs?

I HAVE CHOSEN TO SET THE PIECE AS THE SONG OF AN amazed young person, essentially a sunny, simple, happy song of praise. Most of the piece is in triple meter—a waltz of praise, a happy dance from someone so excited, so amazed, by what is happening to her that she rushes off to share the news with her relative, Elizabeth. I have chosen to set the text in a manner accessible enough for church choirs to be able to learn it, even during the pressure of a busy Advent season. Yes, I know at our conference we heard it sung by a college choir, a group more sophisticated than many church choirs. Yes, I know I'm blessed to work with such talented singers. But, I'm not *that* blessed. Over two-thirds of the choir is new this year; we've only been together for six weeks; and even though we may rehearse three days a week, at no time is everyone present because the realities of life here are that choir conflicts with other activities, including science labs. This is not a complaint—it's merely a rehearsal of realities. We are more like a church choir than some might imagine. Neither the organ part nor the trumpet part of the piece is that difficult; so I hope this piece is something that can be used out there, not just in here.

Another useful thing, I believe, is that this setting uses the words of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Most English settings use the elegant King James Version. Especially in the context of the ecumenical lectionary, it seemed appropriate to use the NRSV. As I began work on the piece I thought, “How about telling the larger story, placing the Magnificat in its Biblical context?” So this piece has two parts, the story leading up to the Magnificat and the canticle itself. The canticle portion can stand alone or it can serve as

conclusion to the entire story as told in Luke 1:26–55.

Part One is envisioned for reader, trumpet, and organ. If possible (and when blessed with a marvelous musician like Marty Hodel of the St. Olaf music faculty) the more mellow voice of the flugelhorn can substitute for the trumpet, adding a new color to the mix. In this part we tell the story leading up to the canticle. Part Two, for choir, trumpet, and organ, is the canticle itself. Now, a comment or two about the musical structure of the piece.

Music as an art form unfolds over time; for the composer a major concern is always the ordering of time, the coherent unfolding of musical events. One of the most common organizational techniques is statement, contrast, restatement. (It's a little bit like the cliché about speeches—first you tell them what you will say, then you say it, then you tell them what you've said.) The challenge in setting a Biblical text is that it often doesn't reflect this kind of structure; it is through-composed.

In the case of the canticle itself, I chose to divide the text into three parts: an opening section of praise, a middle section exploring the social justice themes in the text, and a last section in the spirit of the first, an affirmation of thanksgiving for God's constancy. Thus the musical ABA'—statement, contrast, modified restatement—form carries the text logically, resulting in a musical coherence not possible if one generates all new musical material for a through-composed text.

Then, for the introductory, narrative portion of the piece, written after the canticle setting, I chose to excerpt musical gestures, especially the principal A theme, thus unifying the narrative Part One with the canticle, Part Two. Part One also explores its own statement, contrast, restatement structure, thus providing an underlying musical, structural cohesion independent from the narrative.

It is up to the listener to determine whether all of this works. No matter how creative the “structure,” the final consideration is not just structural coherence but a more basic question, “Does it work?”

ARE THERE SPECIFIC EXEGETICAL MOVES, SPECIFIC TEXT painting musical gestures in the piece? Well, the middle section slows a bit, gives us more time to consider the profound implications of the text. The rich are sent away empty as first the organ and then the women drop out, with the men left holding a single, “empty,” pitch. The proud are scattered energetically through repeated, layered rhythmic patterns in trumpet and choir, reflecting the sound and meaning of the word, scattered. These are not radically dramatic musical things, yet the text did influence the musical fabric and gestures at these places.

As I worked with and manipulated the musical materials in this piece, especially the “licks” for flugelhorn and trumpet, I began to wonder about something else. Is it possible that we don't know the most important portions of Mary's song? Is it possible that this song of praise was

accompanied by sighs too deep for words, by ecstatic shouts that transcended words? Perhaps without first intending it, the soaring lines of the flugelhorn and trumpet become companion to the words of the canticle, suggesting once again that when mere words are inadequate, pure song—gracious, soaring melody—takes over.

Now let's listen to a recording of this Magnificat. After sharing some of what influenced my compositional work, I hope you will be enabled to listen with different ears—not better ears, just different ones. (*Readers may listen to this piece at our website <http://www.valpo.edu/cresset>*)

A sentence in our music department mission statement reads: *Inspired by the conviction that music is a divine gift, we will continue to cultivate a spirit of exploration and innovation, seeking and celebrating the transcendent and*

transforming power of music. Working, teaching, making music in this college of the church is wonderful because I am affirmed in my attempts to embrace the challenge and joy of synthesizing my faith with my discipline. Making and teaching music here can be duty and delight. Certainly it is *not* just work. Certainly it *is* vocation. ✠

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