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# He Started the Whole World Singing a Song

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# He Started the Whole World Singing a Song

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## Abstract

Throughout history, music has moved people in powerful ways, so much so that, at times, it leaves them speechless. They realize that it is a song, full of notes and rhythms, yet at the same time, it makes them become profoundly aware that there is something *more*, humming just below the surface. My presentation seeks to enter into this music moment by asking why these types of moments even occur. Does music speak or communicate? If so, does it communicate something meaningful and significant? What is the mechanism by which music conveys this meaning? How can this meaning be articulated in words?

Many fields of science such as neuroimaging and psychoacoustics have revealed an empirical connection between language and music, namely that the human brain processes and understands music as communication and speech. Building upon this, I then discuss musical meaning by stating that music has both intrinsic, structural meaning, as well as extrinsic, referential meaning, and that together, these two paradigms of meaning aid the listener in experiencing the full nature of the music itself. I next introduce the field of theology, showing how throughout the Bible, all of creation has musically celebrated the presence of an immanently transcendent God. With all of these things in mind, I postulate that music has the capacity to act as a channel through which one can hear a linguistic God speaking vitality, order, beauty, depth, structure, and wonder into His creation by His Word and Spirit. The presentation concludes by asserting that music has the capacity to reveal the presence of God in our everyday lives through the divine realities of hope, faith, and love.

## Keywords

Language, musical meaning, holism, presence of God

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## He Started the Whole World Singing a Song

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**T**hroughout history, people from a variety of backgrounds have commented on the relationship between music and language. Several say that music transcends language; some refer to music as being another language; others believe music actually speaks. In spite of a diversity of responses, there is still a collective sense that music and language are intriguingly related—a profound, intuitive awareness of some type of bonding agent between the two. Music has also been perceived throughout history to possess meaning and power, both on a grand, cosmic level and an anthropic, human level. For the Greek philosopher Plato, music acted as something that “[implanted] cosmic harmony into the soul of humans,”<sup>1</sup> while in the Old Testament of the Bible, “[w]henever the spirit from God troubled Saul, David would pick up his lyre and play, and Saul would then be relieved, feel better.”<sup>2</sup>

Music moves listeners powerfully and communicates meaning in ways that are often difficult or impossible to express in words. In this paper, I wish to explore the essence of these musical moments and attempt to articulate why they occur from a theological framework. This framework will consist of demonstrating a connection between language and music, discussing how music is able to possess meaning, and showing that throughout the Bible, people have responded to the transcendent and immanent presence of the Triune God working in and through creation musically. With this framework in place, I will conclude this paper by discussing how music has the capacity to reveal three essential qualities of what it means to be fully human in a world where God is fully present: hope, faith, and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 80.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Sam. 16:23 (Holman Christian Standard Bible).

The connection between language and music does not appear only among the creative offerings of writers, poets, painters, or actors. Within the fields of psychoacoustics, neurobiology, neuropsychology, and neuromusicology, several studies have been conducted showing evidence for some sort of link between language and music. In the field of neuropsychology, Anthony Brandt and Molly Gebrian have studied newborns and their early development at the Shepherd School of Music and the Language and Music Cognition Lab at the University of Maryland, reporting that “music learning matches the speed and effort of language acquisition” and arguing that there is a “deep early entanglement of music and language.”<sup>3</sup> In the field of psychoacoustics, Masumi Wakita of the Primate Research Institute at Kyoto University, Japan has shown that music is processed in the same key area of the brain that language comprehension and understanding is processed—Broca’s area: “hierarchical processing in Broca’s area is a common function shared between language and music.”<sup>4</sup> Lastly, in the field of neuroimaging, Dr. Charles Limb at Johns Hopkins University has shown that “the areas of the musicians’ brains linked to syntax and language processing were activated [by scanning the brains of eleven skilled jazz musicians while improvising together]. When two jazz musicians seem lost in thought while [improvising], they aren’t simply waiting for their turn to play. Instead, they are using the syntactic areas of their brain to process what they are hearing so they can respond by playing a new series of notes that hasn’t previously been composed or practiced.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there is a scientifically observable link between language and music, present from infancy through adulthood in musicians and non-musicians alike.

Even though scientists and researchers have used the scientific method to study the relationship of music and language, one does not have to be a scientist to observe some basic, obvious similarities between the two; for example, music and language are both *phonetic*, dealing with sounds, and they are both *syntactic*, dealing with hierarchical groupings, or structures, of sounds. Dr. Aniruddh D. Patel, Associate Professor of Psychology at Tufts University, has conducted extensive

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Brandt, Molly Gebrian, and L. Robert Slevc, "Music and Early Language Acquisition," *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012): 1-17, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Masumi Wakita, "Broca’s Area Processes the Hierarchical Organization of Observed Action," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 7 (2014): 1-7, 1.

<sup>5</sup> David McNamee, "Brain Scans of Jazz Musicians Unveil Language and Music Similarities: Medical News Today," *Medical News Today*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/273060.php>.

research on how the brain processes music and language with respect to sound and structure. Specifically, he has studied the rhythmic relationship of sounds and the hierarchical relationship of the grouping of sounds with music and language. These two studies in particular shed considerable light on how music and language are related to one another.

First, consider the rhythmic relationship of sounds. It is quite clear that music and language possess a sense of pulse, or emphasis, at certain points that can be measured. For music, each note or rest has a defined duration of time based on the time signature. In  $\frac{4}{4}$  time, a quarter note lasts for one beat; a whole note for four beats, and so on. With language, it is not as obvious and well defined. There exist many diverse ways of expressing rhythmicity in language for each culture. However, there are two broad categories that most languages can be grouped under: stress-timed languages, such as English and German, and syllable-timed languages, such as French and Italian. Stress-timed languages are characterized by a rhythm in which primary stresses occur at roughly equal intervals, irrespective of the number of unstressed syllables in between. Syllable-timed languages, on the other hand, are characterized by a rhythm in which syllables occur at roughly equivalent time intervals, irrespective of the stress placed on them.

With these categories in place, it is possible to measure rhythmicity in speech by using the nPVI, or Normalized Pairwise Variability Index. The nPVI is defined as the “measure of the variability of successive syllabic durations in spoken language based on vowel length.”<sup>6</sup> As it turns out, stressed-timed languages have higher nPVI values than syllable-timed languages. Stressed-timed languages such as English and German have nPVI values of 70 and 59.7 respectively, while syllable-timed languages such as French and Italian have nPVI values of 49.3 and 46.0 respectively.<sup>7</sup> In other words, English and German have a higher contrast in successive vowel duration than French and Italian.

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<sup>6</sup> Justin London and Katherine Jones, "Metrical Hierarchies and Musical nPVI: A Re-analysis of Patel and Daniele," *International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition* 11 (2010): 379-380, <http://depts.washington.edu/icmpc11/ICMPC11/PDF/AUTHOR/MP100015.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph R. Daniele and Aniruddh D. Patel, "The Interplay of Linguistic and Historical Influences on Musical Rhythm in Different Cultures," *International Conference on Musical Perception and Cognition* 8 (2004): 759-762, 759. [http://www.nsi.edu/~ani/Daniele\\_Patel\\_ICMPC8.pdf](http://www.nsi.edu/~ani/Daniele_Patel_ICMPC8.pdf).

What is intriguing is that it is possible to calculate the nPVI value for any given piece of music. Using the nPVI equation, Patel and his colleagues have calculated average nPVI values of musical compositions and have compared them to the nPVI value of their respective composer's native language.<sup>8</sup> The results are striking: "Recent empirical data on linguistic and musical rhythm from a number of different cultures supports the idea that musical rhythm reflects speech rhythm. Nations where 'stress-timed' languages are spoken tend to have greater durational contrast between successive vowels in sentences and successive notes in musical themes than nations where 'syllable-timed' languages are spoken."<sup>9</sup> For example, the average nPVI value of English music is 45.6, whereas the average nPVI value for Italian music is 42.7.<sup>10</sup> In other words, by calculating the nPVI for scores of music and comparing them to the nPVI value for the composer's native language, Daniele and his colleagues have been able to demonstrate an empirically noticeable link between the rhythmicity of linguistic and musical sounds.

Second, consider the hierarchal relationship of the grouping of sounds, specifically the processing of syntax with both language and music. Research in neuroimaging has shown that there is a significant overlap in how the brain processes music and language in that it activates the "language" areas of the brain such as Broca's area and Wernicke's area. Broca's area controls the production of speech, and Wernicke's area controls the understanding of speech and writing. Three different types of brain imaging techniques have demonstrated this phenomenon: the MEG, used to map neural pathways and brain activity, the fMRI, which measures brain activity by detecting changes in blood flow, and the PET, used to obtain 3D image of brain activity. The MEG scan showed that processing harmony in music originates in Broca's area.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>  $nPVI = \frac{100}{m-1} * \sum_{k=1}^{m-1} \left| \frac{d_k - d_{k+1}}{\frac{d_k + d_{k+1}}{2}} \right|$ , where  $m$  is the # of notes in a theme and  $d_k$  is

the duration of the  $k$ th note.

<sup>9</sup> Daniele and Patel, "The Interplay of Linguistic and Historical Influences on Musical Rhythm in Different Cultures," 759-762, 761.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 759.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Koelsch and Walter A. Siebel, "Towards a Neural Basis of Music Perception," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 9, no. 12 (2005): 578-584, doi:[10.1016/j.tics.2005.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2005.10.001).

The fMRI scan also showed harmonic processing in Broca's area.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the PET scan revealed that both Broca's area and Wernicke's area were involved in musical harmonic processing.<sup>13</sup>

While the neuroimaging studies mentioned above confirm an overlap in how the brain syntactically processes language and music, studies conducted in the field of neuropsychology also confirm that the brain processes musical syntax and linguistic syntax distinctively. There are examples of people who have suffered brain damage and cannot perceive music (known as amusia) who do not suffer from the inability to understand speech and language (known as aphasia). Likewise, there are those who cannot comprehend speech or language and yet can still understand, appreciate, and even compose music. To give an example, Russian composer Vissarion Shebalin, after suffering "two strokes in his left hemisphere" and consequently having "severe difficulties in comprehending and producing language...composed at least nine new pieces, including a symphony hailed by the Soviet composer Shostakovich as a 'brilliant creative work.'"<sup>14</sup>

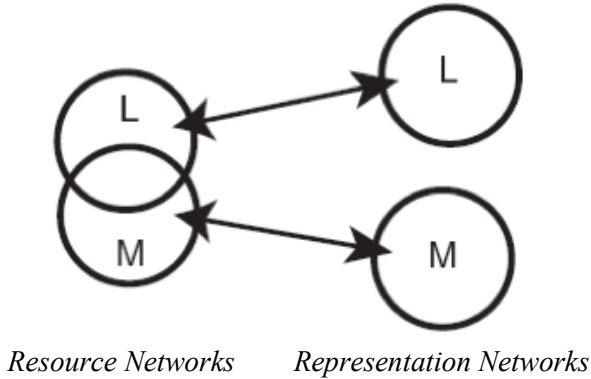
This leads to an apparently irreconcilable paradox: neuroimaging says there is an overlap, while neuropsychology says there is no overlap. Which is it? According to Patel, *both* are equally true. Patel has developed a hypothesis entitled the "shared syntactic integration resource hypothesis," or "resource-sharing hypothesis" for short. See Figure 1:

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Tillmann, "Implicit Investigations of Tonal Knowledge in Nonmusician Listeners," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1060 (2005): 100-110, doi:[10.1196/annals.1360.007](https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1360.007).

<sup>13</sup> Steven Brown, Michael J. Martinez, and Lawrence M. Parsons, "Music and Language Side by Side in the Brain: a PET Study of the Generation of Melodies and Sentences," *European Journal of Neuroscience* 23 (2006): 2791-2803, doi:[10.1111/j.1460-9568.2006.04785.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-9568.2006.04785.x).

<sup>14</sup> Aniruddh D. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 270.



**Figure 1:** Resource-sharing Hypothesis Schematic<sup>15</sup>

The resource-sharing hypothesis states that, while language and music are certainly recognized as distinct phenomena in the brain, the resources that the brain uses to process language and music overlap. In other words, the brain uses common resource networks to *internally* process language and music, but separate representation networks to *externally* realize language and music. In Patel’s own words: “This research suggests that although musical and linguistic syntax have distinct and domain-specific syntactic representations, there is overlap in the neural resources that serve to activate and integrate these representations during syntactic processing (the ‘shared syntactic integration resource hypothesis’).”<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, language is not music, and music is not language. Language has words, commas, subjects, predicates, sentence trees, and parts of speech. Music has notes, rests, tempo markings, key signatures, and time signatures. However, in spite of their differences, there is a foundational, unifying, undeniable overlap in the way music and language are processed and understood by humans. Patel himself views the resource-sharing hypothesis as an act of “reconciling the paradox”<sup>17</sup> of language and music processing.

Building upon the premise that music has an underlying bond with language, one can now ask questions related to music and meaning: If there is a connection with language and music, is it possible for music to communicate and mean something specifically? Does musical

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 284.



meaning exist? In spite of all the significant research being conducted by neuroscientists, no one has been able to explain fully why music moves and why listening to a certain piece of music matters. American composer Aaron Copland summarized the issue at hand in this way:

This whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, “Is there any meaning to music?” My answer to that would be, “Yes.” And “Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?” My answer to that would be, “No.” Therein lies the difficulty.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout history musicians, philosophers, and writers alike have tried to grasp the meaning of music. Consider the following. First, musical harmony holds the universe and everything in it together. This theory, known as the Music of the Spheres, essentially stated that “planets and stars of different sizes emit different pitches, generating a huge, but inaudible, cosmic music”<sup>19</sup> which directly affects life on earth. Pythagoras, an ancient Greek philosopher, first championed this concept. Second, music expresses unambiguous thoughts that are expressed in ambiguous language. Felix Mendelssohn, writing about his *Songs without Words*, held to this position on the meaning of music, stating in a letter that “only the song can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another—a feeling which is not, however, expressed by the same words.”<sup>20</sup> Third, music satisfies deeply human, biological needs. This view, endorsed by many modern researchers such as Steven Mithen, Stefan Koelsch, and W. Tecumseh Fitch, states that musical meaning exists in that it aids in “increased social cohesion of a group,” “sexual selection,” “survival functions,” “sympathy, empathetic concern, and compassion,”<sup>21</sup> and “parent-

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<sup>18</sup> Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, Rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 79.

<sup>20</sup> Felix Mendelssohn to Marc-André Souchay, October 15, 1842, trans. John Michael Cooper, in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk, 161 (6:14), (New York: W.W Norton & Company, Inc., 1950).

<sup>21</sup> Stefan Koelsch, "Neural Correlates of Music Perception," in *Language, Music, and the Brain*, ed. Michael Arbib (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 166-168.

offspring communication (caregiving).”<sup>22</sup> The worldviews of naturalism and evolutionism have heavily influenced this particular understanding of musical meaning. Fourth, music has no meaning. The most prominent scholar who holds this outlook is Peter Kivy, who says that “whether music has meaning is like asking whether a rock is dead: It is a ‘category error.’”<sup>23</sup> In *Music, Language, and Cognition*, Kivy even refers to the word *meaning* as “the ‘m’ word,” going so far as to say that he “[thinks] it would be the better part to give up the word altogether.”<sup>24</sup> Finally, music points to something broader and larger outside of itself. Morris Cohen once stated, “anything acquires meaning if it is connected with, or indicates, or refers to, something beyond itself, so that its full nature points to and is revealed in that connection.”<sup>25</sup> Referring specifically to this view of music and meaning, Mihailo Antović calls music a “grand signifier capable of conveying meaning”<sup>26</sup>

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, this paper will focus specifically on the last point; namely, that music points to something broader and larger outside of itself. This *pointing-to* or *hinting-at* idea with respect to meaning in music has an entire field of study dedicated to it, known as music semiology. Semiology is the study of signs or symbols and their interpretation. Therefore, musical semiotics is the study of signs or symbols and their interpretation within the context of *music*.

Signs and symbols are encountered continually in everyday life. Obvious signs such as traffic lights and speed limit signs have a specific meaning. Ambiguous signs include body language and the phenomenon of “reading between the lines.” Words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects are all signs and symbols. The specific characteristics of signs and symbols and how they are used are

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<sup>22</sup> W. Tecumseh Fitch, "The Evolution of Music in Comparative Perspective," *New York Academy of Sciences* 1060 (2005): 29-49, doi:[10.1196/annals.1360.004](https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1360.004).

<sup>23</sup> Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain*, 304.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Kivy, *Music, Language, and Cognition: And Other Essays in the Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 153.

<sup>25</sup> Morris R. Cohen, *A Preface to Logic* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1944), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Mihailo Antović, "Musicolinguistics: From a Neologism to an Acknowledged Field," *Linguistics and Literature* 3, no. 2 (2005): 244, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1689111>.

plentiful, but one common trait runs through them: signs and symbols point to, and reference, things outside of themselves. They are, at the same time, *distanced from reality* and *rooted in reality*.<sup>27</sup> This is a concept known as metaphor, defined as “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.”<sup>28</sup> Or as Leonard Bernstein stated in *The Unanswered Question*, a metaphor “must function in terms of the two compared items being related to a third item, which is common to both.”<sup>29</sup> Metaphors can thus be described as “rooted and partly rooted;” rooted, in that the two items being compared can be explicitly observed on paper; partly rooted, in that the common quality the other two items possess is implicitly perceived by the reader, but is nonetheless present and real.<sup>30</sup> To phrase it another way, metaphors attempt to portray an immaterial concept using a relationship between material things that seem, at least on the surface, irreconcilably opposed to each other, or at the very least not at all concerned with one another. This portrayal of an immaterial concept is that third common item, the “X-factor,” that emerges out of the comparison between those two items.<sup>31</sup>

The above discussion indicates why Byron Almén would describe music as “a system of signs” and musical meaning as “the relationship between elements and the rules of organization within a system...that perform similar or parallel functions [within another system].”<sup>32</sup> This is also why Bernstein refers to metaphor as “the generator [and] power-plant of music,” stating that music has “specific and far reaching metaphorical powers [in that it] can name the unnamable, and communicate the unknowable.”<sup>33</sup> Recalling Cohen’s quote: “Anything acquires meaning if it is connected with, or indicates, or refers to, something beyond itself, so that its full nature points to and is revealed in that connection.” Musical meaning, then, is revealed in its connection with, indication of, and reference to, something beyond

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, s.v. “Metaphor,” accessed November 29, 2014, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/metaphor>

<sup>29</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 125.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>33</sup> Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question*, 139-140.

itself. Therefore, it is clear that music has both *intrinsic* meaning and *extrinsic* meaning. Intrinsic, because it is the full nature of the music itself that is revealed; extrinsic, because in its fullness of revelation, the music itself reveals an extramusical connection that seems impossible to grasp. A paradox continually returns: musical meaning is real, yet surreal, implicit, yet explicit, and rooted, yet partly rooted, all at the same time.

This paradox has a name: *holism*. Holism is “the reality that emerges only when all the parts are put together but can’t be individually located, labeled, or identified at a smaller, component, parts level.”<sup>34</sup> In order to understand holism, one may ask: “Which wing of an airplane is the most important one?”<sup>35</sup> The purpose or function of an airplane is not based upon an analytical comparison of each wing; rather it is *flight*, which would be utterly impossible without *both* wings existing on either side of the fuselage together.

Musical meaning exists holistically. It is a union of two distinct paradigms of meaning, intrinsic and extrinsic, that are somehow connected with one another or fused together so that in their union, the individual parts are distinguishable yet indivisible. Unfortunately, in the attempts to probe the depths of musical meaning, a needless chasm has been created. Those who believe that musical meaning should “be studied on the basis of its internal, inherent structural relationships, with no reference whatsoever to the external world” are known as *formalists*, such as Leonard Bernstein, Ivan Focht, and Douglas Dempster.<sup>36</sup> As Bernstein states, “[M]usic has intrinsic meanings of its own...it is a meaning conveyed by the sounding notes themselves.”<sup>37</sup> Those who believe that “music should be studied through what it sparks outside itself” and hold that “music is thus explained through human affectual reaction” are known as *referentialists*, such as Deryck Cooke and Isabelle Peretz.<sup>38</sup> In *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music*, Peretz indicates that “music in its universal guise not only involves sound and movement, but also it involves multiplicity of reference and

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<sup>34</sup> Rob Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 59.

<sup>35</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Jeff Cook for this analogy.

<sup>36</sup> Antović, “Musicolinguistics,” 244.

<sup>37</sup> Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question*, 131-135.

<sup>38</sup> Antović, “Musicolinguistics,” 244.

meaning.”<sup>39</sup> These two schools of thought with respect to musical meaning represent each “wing” on the “airplane of music.” They both need each other, and cannot be separated from each other. The extrinsic meaning informs the intrinsic meaning, and vice versa. In order to experience the music in its fullest sense, the concept of musical meaning existing both intrinsically and extrinsically needs to be emphasized. Leonard Meyer, a composer, philosopher, and author, sums it up best:

Music gives rise to both types of meaning. Music may be meaningful because it refers to things outside itself, evoking associations and connotations relative to the world of ideas, sentiments, and physical objects...Or music may be meaningful in the sense that within the context of a particular musical style one tone or group of tones indicates—leads the practiced listener to expect—that another tone or group of tones will be forthcoming at some more or less specified point in the musical continuum. Although these two types of meaning are logically separable, there is in practice an intimate interaction between them.<sup>40</sup>

In conclusion, much research in musical meaning has been conducted within an array of academic fields including neuroscience, neuropsychology, neuroimaging, biomusicology, psychology, linguistics, history, and philosophy. In spite of this, the relationship of language, music, and musical meaning remains highly elusive and abstract. Nevertheless, some scholars believe they are getting closer to comprehending this “sustenance that, still hidden, flows beneath our feet.”<sup>41</sup> J. Peter Burkholder states:

Approaches [to musical meaning] have drawn on philosophy, music theory, musicology, and cultural history, as well as trends in literary criticism such as

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<sup>39</sup> Isabelle Peretz and Robert J. Zatorre, eds., *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, "Meaning in Music and Information Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 4 (1957): 413, doi:10.2307/427154.

<sup>41</sup> Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall, eds., "The Divining Rod: On Imagination, Interpretation, and Analysis," in *Approaches to Meaning in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 10.

semiotics, intertextuality, influence studies, deconstruction, and postmodernism. This discussion has brought new and valuable insights, but it has not yet resulted in a clear description of the mechanism by which music conveys meaning.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps Burkholder and others are missing the most important field that would shed light on the meaning of music and the connection of language and music: *theology*, the study of the nature of God. If theology were the lens through which one understood the relationship of language, music, and musical meaning, perhaps one would be able to articulate how music is intricately linked to the presence of God working in and through His creation.

It is crucial to preface this discussion of music and the presence of God by clearly speaking about God's nature, namely that He is both transcendent yet, at the same time, also immanent. Jürgen Moltmann refers to this concept as *immanent transcendence*: "a transcendence which is immanent in things...the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal, and the enduring in the transitory."<sup>43</sup> God is the "soul of the universe"<sup>44</sup> while at the same time being "closer to you than you are to yourself."<sup>45</sup> The immanent transcendence of God the Father can be seen throughout scripture by looking at the natures of the other two members of the Trinity—the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

There is a clear focus on the transcendence of God's Spirit throughout the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach* (רוּחַ), which the writers of the Old Testament used to describe everything as "having a singular, creative, common source—whom they called God—who powers and energizes and sustains all."<sup>46</sup> This life-giving Spirit of God

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<sup>42</sup> J. Peter Burkholder, "A Simple Model for Associative Musical Meaning," in *Approaches to Meaning in Music*, ed. Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>43</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Munich: First Fortress Press, 1992), 35.

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley and Edward H. Sugden, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," in *Standard Sermons*, 5th ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1964), Discourse III, I. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 106-107.

was seen to be the source of everything's existence,<sup>47</sup> the means by which beauty was realized,<sup>48</sup> and referred to the renewal and sustenance of all life on earth.<sup>49</sup> It is also the Spirit of God, *Ruach Elohim*, who “was hovering over the surface of the waters” before the creation event.<sup>50</sup> While the people of the Old Testament understood the Spirit of God to be transcendent, they also understood Him as being immanently present among them. The Hebrew word that captures this concept is *Shekinah*<sup>51</sup> (הִיכָּנָה), meaning “the descent and indwelling of God in space and time.”<sup>52</sup> The ancient Hebrew people experienced the immanent *Shekinah* when He led them out of Egypt's bondage through the Red Sea by appearing as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,<sup>53</sup> when God's presence filled the tabernacle,<sup>54</sup> while they carried the Ark of the Covenant,<sup>55</sup> and when God took up residence in the temple.<sup>56</sup> The immanent presence of the Spirit of God can also be observed in the New Testament. The word for *spirit* in the New Testament is the Greek word *pneuma* (πνεῦμα), which can refer to the indwelling presence of God in the life of a follower of Jesus,<sup>57</sup> the life force of the human body,<sup>58</sup> the means through which human beings feel, think, decide, or act,<sup>59</sup> and the means by which followers of Jesus are empowered to be witnesses of the gospel.<sup>60</sup>

Along with the immanent transcendence of God's Spirit, the Bible also reveals Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as being immanently transcendent. It is relatively common to talk about Jesus in terms of His immanence. In the Old Testament, He is referred to as *Immanuel* (עִמָּנוּאֵל), which means “God is with us.” In the New Testament, He is not only described as being with us, but He is also *in* us—the church,

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<sup>47</sup> Ps. 104:30a (HCSB).

<sup>48</sup> Job 26:13a (HCSB).

<sup>49</sup> Ps. 104:30b (HCSB).

<sup>50</sup> Gen. 1:2 (HCSB).

<sup>51</sup> Though the word *Shekinah* is not in the Bible, the concept is nonetheless there. A similar word with the same Semitic root, *mishkan*, is used in the Bible to refer to God's dwelling place.

<sup>52</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Exod. 13:21-22 (HCSB).

<sup>54</sup> Exod. 40:34 (HCSB).

<sup>55</sup> Exod. 25:22 (HCSB).

<sup>56</sup> 1 Kings 8:11-13 (HCSB).

<sup>57</sup> Rom. 8:11 (HCSB).

<sup>58</sup> Luke 8:55 (HCSB).

<sup>59</sup> 1 Cor. 2:10-11 (HCSB).

<sup>60</sup> Acts 1:8 (HCSB).

the body of Christ.<sup>61</sup> However, Jesus is not merely “a human with special powers.”<sup>62</sup> The New Testament writers, specifically John, describe Jesus in a much more transcendent, expansive way. John describes Jesus as “the Word,” which, in the original Greek language, is the word *logos* (λόγος).<sup>63</sup> Concerning the word *logos*, R. C. Sproul comments:

In Greek philosophy, the *logos* remains an impersonal force, a lifeless and abstract philosophical concept that is a necessary postulate for the cause of order and purpose in the universe. In Hebrew thought, the *Logos* is personal. He indeed has the power of unity, coherence, and purpose, but the distinctive point is that the Biblical *Logos* is a He, not an it.<sup>64</sup>

By referring to Jesus as *logos*, John identifies Jesus as “the incarnate Utterance of God, communicating the way and will of God” from before the creation of the universe.<sup>65</sup> It is this transcendent view of Jesus that the writer of Hebrews has in mind when they describe Jesus as being the one “through whom also [God] made the universe” and the one who “sustain[s] all things by His powerful word.”<sup>66</sup> Paul even describes Jesus as the one who “fills all things in every way.”<sup>67</sup>

From this discussion about the nature of God, one can imply two concepts that will become important in the discussion of how music relates to the presence of God. First, God is intrinsically a God of language who speaks and communicates out of Himself and His very nature. Sheridan Poythress remarks, “Calling [Jesus] ‘the Word’

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<sup>61</sup> Col. 1:27; Gal. 2:20 (HCSB).

<sup>62</sup> Rob Bell and David Vanderveen, *The Love Wins Companion* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 125.

<sup>63</sup> John 1:1 (HCSB).

<sup>64</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Interpreting the Logos: In the Presence of God: Week of April 7." Crosswalk.com. April 7, 2014.

<http://www.crosswalk.com/devotionals/inpresenceofgod/in-the-presence-of-god-week-of-april-12-11628730.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Victoria Jones, "Jesus as Logos, or Cosmic Christ (Part 1)," *The Jesus Question*. March 7, 2011. Accessed November 9, 2014.

<http://thejesusquestion.org/2011/03/07/jesus-as-logos-or-cosmic-christ-part-1/>.

<sup>66</sup> Heb. 1:2b (New International Version), 3b (HCSB).

<sup>67</sup> Eph. 1:23b (HCSB).



indicates a relation between the Trinitarian character of God and language.”<sup>68</sup> The Psalmist in the Old Testament says this: “[God] spoke, and it came into being; He commanded, and it came into existence.”<sup>69</sup> Further, Martin Luther affirmed that language reflects God’s very essence, believing that “God [is] first and foremost a God of speech” and that “linguisticity is part of [His] very nature.”<sup>70</sup> Second, one can observe a theological concept known as coinherence or *perichoresis*, which describes the mutually indwelling relationship of the members of the Trinity. Where one member is present, the other two are also present. This is an important concept to grasp, because it reveals a fundamental connection between the Word of God, *logos*, and the Spirit of God, *ruach*. In the discussion above, concerning the immanent transcendence of God, the writer of Genesis states that the Spirit of God was present at the creation event, while John and the other writers of the New Testament state that Jesus was as well. Similarly, Paul states in different books that it is both Jesus and the Spirit of God that dwell in the life of the believer. Lastly, the Psalmist identifies God’s Spirit as the One who sustains all things, but the writer of Hebrews identifies that Jesus sustains all things as well. These are not contradictory assertions; it simply points to the fact that the Son dwells in the Spirit, and vice versa. In other words, where the Word of God is present, the Spirit of God is also present.

It is from this understanding of the nature of God that one can begin to discuss music and language from a theological standpoint, specifically by showing that music, throughout the Bible, is used to celebrate the presence of God’s immanent and transcendent Word and Spirit at work in and through all of creation.

First, consider the creation accounts of the Bible. It is clear from Genesis 1 that when “God speaks...it happens. God says it...and it comes into being. Before it’s chaotic and empty and dark. But then God speaks into that dark disorder radiant, pulsating life with all of its wonder and diversity and creativity.”<sup>71</sup> Consider now the Psalmist’s praise to the Creator: “The heavens were made by the word of the Lord,

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<sup>68</sup> Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language: A God-centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 20.

<sup>69</sup> Ps. 33:9 (HCSB).

<sup>70</sup> Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 51.

<sup>71</sup> Bell and Vanderveen, *Love Wins*, 145-146.

and all the stars, by the breath of His mouth.”<sup>72</sup> The Hebrew word for *word* in this verse is *dabar* (דָּבָר), which means to speak or declare through verbal utterances. Interestingly, the New Testament’s Greek equivalent for *dabar* is the word *rhema* (ῥῆμα), the same word in Hebrews 1 that is used to describe how Jesus sustains all things: by “His powerful word.”<sup>73</sup> Further, the word for *breath* is the word *ruach*, which is associated with the life-giving Spirit of God. Combining these thoughts, one can see how both the Word of God, existing as Jesus Christ (*logos*) and as Jesus’s verbal utterances (*rhema*), and the Spirit of God (*ruach*) are coinherently present during the creation of the universe.

Thus, the whole of creation responds musically, singing for joy in response to God’s presence. The book of Job mentions how “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy” at the creation event<sup>74</sup>; the Psalmist in Psalm 96 says, “Sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth....For the Lord is great and is highly praised...the Lord made the heavens....Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and all that fills it resound. Let the fields and everything in them exult.”<sup>75</sup> Psalm 100 continues the musical praise about the creation event: “Shout triumphantly to the Lord, all the earth...come before Him with joyful songs...He made us, and we are His—His people, the sheep of His pasture.”<sup>76</sup> Psalm 150 sums it up best:

Hallelujah! Praise God in His sanctuary. Praise Him in His mighty heavens. Praise Him for His powerful acts; praise Him for His abundant greatness. Praise Him with trumpet blast; praise Him with harp and lyre. Praise Him with tambourine and dance; praise Him with flute and strings. Praise Him with resounding cymbals; praise Him with clashing symbols. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Hallelujah!<sup>77</sup>

Note that humans are not the only part of creation that responds musically to the presence of God; *all* of creation—the heavens, seas,

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<sup>72</sup> Ps. 33:6 (HCSB).

<sup>73</sup> Heb. 1:3b (HCSB).

<sup>74</sup> Job 38:7 (HCSB).

<sup>75</sup> Ps. 96:1-2a, 4a, 5b, 11-12a (HCSB).

<sup>76</sup> Ps. 100:1, 2b, 3b (HCSB).

<sup>77</sup> Ps. 150 (HCSB).

fields, and everything that breathes—celebrates the presence of God’s Word and Spirit which brings order and unity to the dynamic, pulsating beauty found in creation.

Second, consider how humanity responds musically to the presence of God throughout the scriptures. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people communally celebrated God’s presence among them, through His Shekinah glory, from as early on as the Exodus. God delivered them from the oppression of Pharaoh, and as a result, Moses led them in this song:

I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted....The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise Him....You will lead the people You have redeemed with Your faithful love; You will guide them to Your holy dwelling with Your strength.”<sup>78</sup>

The Jewish people also celebrated musically in the tabernacle, the place established for God to dwell among them. David, identifying God as his stronghold, says his “desire” is to “dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of [his] life, gazing on the beauty of the Lord,” and that he will “offer sacrifices in [God’s] tent with shouts of joy. [He] will sing and make music to the Lord.”<sup>79</sup> The Ark of the Covenant also served as a place for the presence of God; as such, the Jewish people, when travelling with the ark, responded musically to God’s presence with them. The writer of 1 Chronicles states, “So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the Lord up with shouts, the sound of the ram’s horn, trumpets, and cymbals, and the playing of harps and lyres.”<sup>80</sup> Lastly, at the dedication of the temple, 2 Chronicles records a mighty musical celebration:

When the priests came out of the holy place, the Levitical singers dressed in fine linen and carrying cymbals, harps, and lyres were standing east of the altar, and with them were 120 priests blowing trumpets...The trumpeters and singers joined together to praise and thank the Lord with one voice. They

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<sup>78</sup> Exod. 15:1a, 2a, 13 (HCSB).

<sup>79</sup> Ps. 27:4b, 6b (HCSB).

<sup>80</sup> 1 Chron. 15:28 (HCSB).

raised their voices, accompanied by trumpets, cymbals, and musical instruments, in praise to the Lord: For He is good; His faithful love endures forever. The temple, the Lord's temple, was filled with a cloud...the glory of the Lord filled God's temple.<sup>81</sup>

In the New Testament, it is interesting to see how much music was made in response to the birth of Jesus, the *logos* of John 1. After the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the Messiah through the Holy Spirit “com[ing] upon” her and “overshadow[ing]” her, and after her visit with Elizabeth, she exclaimed what is known as the Song of Mary, found in Luke 1: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.”<sup>82</sup> From this passage, one can observe that the birth of Jesus, the Word of God, also involves the Spirit of God, which again points to the coinherent presence of God's Spirit and God's Word. Later on in the story, the angels in heaven also respond musically to Jesus being born, while lonely shepherds watch their sheep: “Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host...praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favors!”<sup>83</sup>

The New Testament contains additional references pertaining to how believers should musically celebrate the presence of God's Word and Spirit, together, dwelling in them. In Colossians, Paul encourages followers of Jesus to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” whereas in Ephesians, he challenges them to “be filled by the Spirit: speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music.”<sup>84</sup> In one passage, Paul refers to the indwelling of the message of Christ; in the other, he refers to the Spirit of God indwelling the believer. However, both passages instruct the believer, in response to this coinherent indwelling of God's Word and Spirit in their life, to sing and make music. Concerning the passage in Ephesians, author Steven Guthrie simply states, “This strong connection between song and the filling of the Spirit is remarkable.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> 2 Chron. 5:11b, 12-14 (HCSB).

<sup>82</sup> Luke 1:35a, 46-47 (HCSB).

<sup>83</sup> Luke 2:13-14 (HCSB).

<sup>84</sup> Col. 3:16 (English Standard Version), Eph. 5:18b-19 (HCSB).

<sup>85</sup> Steven Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 79.

As one can see, there is indeed a connection between music and the celebration of the presence of God throughout the Scriptures. Music is used by all of creation to celebrate both the transcendence of a Creator who created all things through His Spirit and His Word, and the immanence of a God whose Word “became flesh and dwelt among us” through the work of the Spirit of God.<sup>86</sup> It is this same cosmic Word and Spirit that indwells each and every follower of Jesus intimately, leading him or her to sing and make music. Jürgen Moltmann insightfully declares: “[I]n the praise of creation the human being sings the cosmic liturgy, and through him the cosmos sings before its Creator the eternal song of creation.”<sup>87</sup>

Thus far, this paper has discussed three major concepts. First, there is a quantifiable and observable connection between music and language. While they are not equals in conveying specifically explicit meaning, they do share striking commonalities at their most basic levels of operation and are interpreted similarly in the brain. With this assumption in place I suggested that music could convey specific meaningful, communicative ideas, thoughts, and actions. Using Morris Cohen’s philosophy of meaning and the principle of holism, I asserted that music having meaning allows the listener to experience the full nature of the music by appreciating both the inherent structural qualities of the notes on paper, as well as to revel in its extrinsic referential associations to the world around us. With these two propositions in place, the third emphasis of this study has focused on showing how music is integral to the response to, and celebration of God’s Word and Spirit being present in and through His creation as recorded in the Bible.

With these three claims in place, I wish to conclude this paper by proposing that the purpose for a divine connection between music, language, and musical meaning is to uncover the presence of God in the realities of hope, faith, and love. I will demonstrate specifically how the connection between music, language, and musical meaning addresses each of these three realities and explain why this is significant.

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<sup>86</sup> John 1:14 (ESV).

<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 71.

Hope has been defined as a “feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.”<sup>88</sup> All humans experience moments of intense anticipation and times of deep yearning for something or someone. It is not only humanity that yearns; Paul tells us “creation eagerly waits”<sup>89</sup> and that the “whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains”<sup>90</sup> for new creation, for the world to be restored to righteousness, and for redemption. Thankfully, the process has already been set into motion with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Through His resurrection, a new creation is bursting forth in the midst of this one; “old things have passed away, and look, new things have come.”<sup>91</sup> While this redemption and new creation initiative has indeed been set into motion, it has not been fully realized or actualized. It has been promised to occur one day, but, as Jürgen Moltmann observes, “[t]he word of promise...always creates an interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise.”<sup>92</sup> N. T. Wright puts it this way: we find ourselves living in the “intersection of the times, of our time and God’s time, of the *then* and the *now* and the *not yet*,”<sup>93</sup> a place full of “intense pain and intense joy.”<sup>94</sup>

It is in this very place that the power of music shines, offering perspective on moments of pain and joy and providing a glimpse of the *not yet* right here in the *now*. There have been painful moments in history where music “[helped] the human heart release its tears” and “sense anew the resilience of hope.”<sup>95</sup> John Tavener’s “Song for Athene” consoled millions at the funeral of Princess Diana as her casket was carried to its final resting place; songs such as “Walk with Me, Lord” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” quickened the hearts of many slaves who suffered under the oppressive hand of the slave trade. “The Soldiers of the Moor” gave Holocaust inmates a chance to express their resistance to the Nazi regime in song. Other musical compositions such as Handel’s “Zadok the Priest” signified the joy and majesty of a

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<sup>88</sup> *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

<sup>89</sup> Rom. 8:19 (HCSB).

<sup>90</sup> Rom. 8:22 (HCSB).

<sup>91</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17 (HCSB).

<sup>92</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James Leitch (Munich: HarperCollins Press, 1967), 104.

<sup>93</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 44.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Music as Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 65.

coronation, and John Rutter's anthem "This is the Day" was commissioned for the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton to signify the hope that the couple would walk safely and happily through their new life together.

Ultimately, "[d]eath will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away."<sup>96</sup> Sorrow and pain will be turned into joy—that is both the announced promise that is waiting to be fulfilled and the story in which we find ourselves. We are "called to live, joyfully and painfully, in [this] story that is both His and ours" and remember that "[o]ur time is in His hands."<sup>97</sup> Through all the changing scenes of life, the tension, the joy, and the pain, music is there to help us live in the tension and to remind us—"however stifled, faint, or repressed it is—that hope is real, that things are headed somewhere, and that that somewhere is good."<sup>98</sup>

The second divine reality that music speaks to is faith: "the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen."<sup>99</sup> The writer of Hebrews continues, saying "[b]y faith we understand that the universe was created by God's commandment, so that what is seen has been made from things that are not visible."<sup>100</sup> There is an imbedded sense of mystery in the world in which we live, the sense that things are what they are, but also, at the same time, point to invisible realities outside themselves that we can't quite understand, but experience all the time. This concept of mystery is not foreign in scripture. C. I. Scofield referred to mystery in scripture as "a previously hidden truth, now divinely revealed, but in which a supernatural element still remains despite the revelation."<sup>101</sup> This of course represents the very nature of Jesus Christ, the intangible "Word (who) became flesh."<sup>102</sup> Paul even refers to Jesus directly as the "mystery of God"<sup>103</sup> several times in his epistles. Robert Capon talks about Jesus as being "a gift hidden in every particle of creation, a gift that goes by the name of *the Mystery of*

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<sup>96</sup> Rev. 21:4 (HCSB).

<sup>97</sup> Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*, 75.

<sup>98</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 121.

<sup>99</sup> Heb. 11:1 (HCSB).

<sup>100</sup> Heb. 11:3 (HCSB).

<sup>101</sup> C. I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1014.

<sup>102</sup> John 1:14a (HCSB).

<sup>103</sup> Col. 2:2 (NIV).

*Christ.*<sup>104</sup> The mystery, of course, is that Jesus is what He is, a “rabbi, who taught and healed” and a “real historical figure,” but at the same time, “there was something present (in Him), someone present, the very God of the universe.”<sup>105</sup> As has been discussed earlier, this Mystery “sustains all things by His powerful word,”<sup>106</sup> “ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe,”<sup>107</sup> “holds all things together,”<sup>108</sup> and is the One “through whom we live.”<sup>109</sup>

Music, I believe, has a way of helping us understand and appreciate this mystery by awakening us to see the presence of Christ all around us through wonder, imagination, and awe. Truly, “the earth is drenched with the presence of God.”<sup>110</sup> When Jacob wakes up from his dream in Genesis 28, he exclaims, “Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”<sup>111</sup> It has been noted that even “little children in the cradle are moved by sweet song and sound, so that they look around, listen with great wonder, open their mouths and eyes, and lose themselves in it, even if they do not understand what it is or what it means.”<sup>112</sup> Music has the capacity to make one aware of faith, to wake him or her up to things that he or she hopes for and does not see, yet experience consistently through the presence of Christ, who is holding all things together and sustaining all things by the utterance of His words. Music possesses intangible, unspeakable qualities that, at times, leave our mouths void of words and eyes full of tears. The divine mystery is that these ethereal realities are only known and experienced *through* the concrete realities of notes on paper and sounds propagating through the air. It is a divine mystery because it reveals the presence of God all around us, and helps articulate the nature of who Jesus is: the God-man who became *tangible* so as to reveal the *intangible* qualities of the Father to mankind.

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<sup>104</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Mystery of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1993), 25.

<sup>105</sup> Bell and Vanderveen, *Love Wins*, 121.

<sup>106</sup> Heb. 1:3 (HCSB).

<sup>107</sup> Eph. 4:10b (NIV).

<sup>108</sup> Col. 1:17 (NET).

<sup>109</sup> 1 Cor. 8:6b (NIV).

<sup>110</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 71.

<sup>111</sup> Gen. 28:16 (HCSB).

<sup>112</sup> Wolfgang Silber, *Encomion Musices: Lob der edlen Kunst der Musicen* (Leipzig, 1622), 15.



Indeed, “Jesus...invites us to embrace our weakness and doubt and anger and whatever other pain and helplessness we’re carrying around, [to offer] it up in all of its mystery, strangeness, pain, and unresolved tension to God.”<sup>113</sup> This means that we will have to put our faith and trust in the Mystery that is ever present with us, among us, and upon us. By talking about the nature of music, I believe one is able to trust this Mystery more easily by becoming cognizant of the reality of faith through the sounds of music.

Love is the third divine reality that music speaks to through the presence of God. The word “love” permeates society at large and is perhaps one of the most flippantly used words throughout modern culture today. People speak about loving football, God, “that dress,” and pizza all in the same breath. The music industry certainly uses the word “love” in a superficial manner. In fact, one researcher noted that the “subject of love and relationships...[has dominated] pop music”<sup>114</sup> since the 1960s. This should come as no surprise; “[p]sychologists have concluded that the need to feel loved is a primary human emotional need.”<sup>115</sup> Deep within the human heart, there is a hunger which only true love can satisfy. There seems to be a constant longing for more and a yearning for wholeness and true satisfaction in today’s “lite” culture, as described by David Brooks:

America, especially suburban America, is depicted as a comfortable but somewhat vacuous realm of unreality: consumerist, wasteful, complacent, materialistic, and self-absorbed. Sprawling, shopping, Disneyfied Americans have cut themselves off from the sources of enchantment, the things that really matter...[t]heir lives are distracted by a buzz of trivial images, by relentless hurry instead of genuine contemplation, information rather than wisdom, and a profusion of superficial choices.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 146.

<sup>114</sup> Cathy Keen, "Love Still Dominates Pop Song Lyrics, but with Raunchier Language," *News: University of Florida*, May 31, 2007, <http://news.ufl.edu/archive/2007/05/love-still-dominates-pop-song-lyrics-but-with-raunchier-language.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010), 19.

<sup>116</sup> David Brooks, *On Paradise Drive* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 110.

The best word that captures this sense of hunger is the German word *sehnsucht*. Greg Boyd comments that it is “an unusual word that is hard to translate, for it expresses a deep longing or craving for something that you can’t quite identify and that always feels just out of reach.”<sup>117</sup> Boyd himself defines *sehnsucht* as the “need to experience God’s perfect, unconditional love.”<sup>118</sup>

It is impossible to talk about God and love as separate entities; where one is, you also find the other, because “God is love.”<sup>119</sup> It is His *modus operandi* for all that He has done and will do. With respect to creation, Moltmann remarks, “Creation...is the communication of His love, which knows neither premises nor preconditions: *creation ex amore Dei*,” and that “creation was called into being out of the inner love which the eternal God Himself *is*.”<sup>120</sup> God, in fact, “so loved the world, that He gave His only Son” for redemption, restoration, and wholeness from separation and sin.<sup>121</sup> Rob Bell puts it this way: “Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came.... This love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about.”<sup>122</sup> It is this sacred reality that music speaks to so poignantly. St. Augustine is quoted as saying, “Love is heavy;”<sup>123</sup> it infuses a lite, dull, mundane culture with weight, significance, and depth. Throughout life, people have experiences that “jolt [them] into the affirmation that whatever *this* is, it matters,”<sup>124</sup> perhaps at a wedding, a funeral, while sharing a meal with a hurting friend, watching a sunset with a significant other, or listening to a certain piece of music.

Music has a way of making one stop and pay attention to what is going on right in front of them, something that is humming just below the surface: the presence of a God who is love. This understanding of the power of music is not new. In eras gone by, music was deemed to be

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<sup>117</sup> Gregory Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 56.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>119</sup> 1 John 4:8b (HCSB).

<sup>120</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 76.

<sup>121</sup> John 3:16a (ESV).

<sup>122</sup> Bell and Vanderveen, *Love Wins*, 197-198.

<sup>123</sup> Charles Chaput, "Library: Called to Live in the Holy Spirit," *Catholic Culture*, July 2008,

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8322>.

<sup>124</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 110.

the entire universe's source of unity, wholeness, and connectedness. There was a belief that "[t]he ancient cosmos was literally *enchanted*—it sang. The music of the spheres ordered the universe with its inaudible harmonies....[M]usic was not simply an object in a magical world, *but the rational agent of enchantment itself*."<sup>125</sup> However, modern society has, for the most part, done away with this enchantment; indeed, Max Weber states that modernity is marked by "the disenchantment of the world."<sup>126</sup> As Bell puts it: "Our days can easily become a blur, the parts and pieces blending together, all of it losing its connection and depth and significance...all of it reduced to what it is at its surface, shallow level, separated from the source."<sup>127</sup>

It is in this place that music has the capacity to reveal a God who desires to "reunite and reconnect [humanity] with the sacred depth, significance, and meaning of every moment of every day."<sup>128</sup> Daniel Chua says it this way:

If music is an integral part of what it is to be human, then it ought to reflect something of the image of God in which we are made. If part of the *imago Dei* is the relationship of love that lies at the heart of the Trinity, then perhaps music can open up a way of thinking about how we relate to the world and to God in a manner where love rather than reason dominates.<sup>129</sup>

Every single human being bears the image of God.<sup>130</sup> To be made in the image of God is to "reflect what God is like and who God is"<sup>131</sup> in the world that He created. In other words, "God intends his wise, creative, loving presence and power to be *reflected*—imaged, if you like—into his world *through* his human creatures."<sup>132</sup> We were made to be in

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<sup>125</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 139-140.

<sup>126</sup> Max Weber, Hans Heinrich Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155.

<sup>127</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 184-85.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, 160.

<sup>130</sup> Gen. 1:26-27 (HCSB).

<sup>131</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections Between Sexuality and Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 3.

<sup>132</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 207.

constant communion with God, to love Him, to be fully satisfied in Him, and to enjoy Him, His creation, and His goodness forever. When sin invaded the world, it hijacked the human heart of its satisfaction in God and cursed us with a nagging sense of nostalgia, shallowness, and hunger in our hearts. Music has the capacity to alert one to this hunger that is inside every human being for the love of God, the shalom that comes from being in relationship with Him, and the life that only He can provide.

To conclude, I have argued throughout this paper that music possesses communicative and meaningful properties, which reveal the power and presence of God in the divine realities of hope, faith, and love. More than eliciting fleeting emotions and cheap sensations, “music communicates the character and providential oversight of God...It communicates goodness and truth.”<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the hymn “This is My Father’s World” conveys this most clearly:

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the  
spheres  
This is my Father’s world: He shines in all that’s fair;  
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass, He speaks to me  
everywhere.<sup>134</sup>

Unfortunately, this hymn “only gives us half the picture—only paradise, and not paradise lost. Creation speaks out of both sides of its mouth now. It sings and rings, but it also groans,”<sup>135</sup> at the same time. Take out the singing and ringing, and all that music ends up doing is distorting, oppressing, enslaving, and portraying the slimy darkness that is the reality of sin, the lie that God is not here and that there is no truth, goodness, life, and beauty in this world. Take out the pain, darkness, and groaning, and music becomes kitsch, which is also a lie. Kitsch is “mediocrity in full masquerade...kitsch is presumptuous, hypocritical mediocrity; it is blatant and strident pretension.”<sup>136</sup> For

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<sup>133</sup>Paul Munson and Joshua Farris Drake, *Art and Music: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 85.

<sup>134</sup>Maltbie Babcock, *This Is My Father’s World*, in *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco, TX: Word Music, 1986).

<sup>135</sup>Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 47-48.

<sup>136</sup>Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 129.

music to be truly meaningful, it has to “[come] to terms with *both* the wounds of the world *and* the promise of resurrection and...express and respond to both of them at once.”<sup>137</sup> This, of course, is exactly what we celebrate on Easter Sunday. Jesus Christ responded to the darkness and evil of creation squarely on the cross, absorbing it in His own death, and then defeating it triumphantly by resurrecting bodily from the grave, thereby initiating a new creation right in the midst of the old one. This truth is echoed by Paul in Philippians when he says, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>138</sup> The words *began*, *good work*, and *complete* first appear in the creation story of Genesis in that particular order. Paul, a man well versed in the ancient Hebrew scriptures, uses those words in the same order to say, “The same creative [expression] that formed the universe is unleashed *in us through our trust in what God is doing in the world through Jesus*.”<sup>139</sup> This is much more than just an abstract intellectual affirmation; it is the real, concrete experience of the presence of God’s Word and Spirit all around us, and, most importantly, in us. Think of it this way:

Imagine that, after you’ve read a review of an album, someone asks you questions about that album—asks what the songs sounded like and what the lyrics were about. There’s a chance you could answer all the questions about that album *without ever actually hearing the songs*. Jesus comes to help us hear the songs.<sup>140</sup>

Indeed, Jesus came to help us hear the songs. As Bill and Gloria Gaither put it:

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<sup>137</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 224.

<sup>138</sup> Phil. 1:6 (ESV).

<sup>139</sup> Bell, *What We Talk About*, 210.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

He started the whole world singing a song  
 The words and the music were there all along  
 What the song had to say was that love found a way  
 To start the world singing a song.<sup>141</sup>

My hope is that this paper on language, music, and musical meaning, in some small way, will awaken the reader to consider and personally experience this song of salvation, which is the most communicative and meaningful song ever sung.

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<sup>141</sup> Bill Gaither, Gloria Gaither, and Chris Waters, *He Started the Whole World Singing a Song* (Alexandria, IN: Gaither Music Group, 1982).

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