

“There Are No Words”: Instrumental Music and the *Missio Dei*

*Jonathan Teram, instructor of Bible and theology
North Park University, Chicago, Illinois*

This piece is wordless but it has been pure healing for me over the past couple of weeks.” So said my dear friend, Rebekah, regarding a piece of music called “Pile of Dust” composed by the late Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson for the 2017 film *The Mercy*. She was referring to a vocal arrangement of the piece sung by the British *a cappella* octet, Voces8. Her comment stirred in me all kinds of thoughts regarding the power of music, the Bible, and the *missio Dei*. Music is mentioned frequently in the Bible and is used not only for worship but also for therapeutic purposes. Moreover, music, like the visual arts, has the ability to metaphorically build bridges between peoples, as the varieties of music in the world perfectly encapsulate the paradox of humanity—that all humans are equal and yet each human is unique.

This may seem axiomatic with regards to vocal music, but it is less so for instrumental music. Despite the hundreds of references to musical instruments in the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible, there has been a long history within Judaism and Christianity of prohibiting musical instruments in worship and religious life. In what follows, I will briefly survey the biblical text and the history of Jewish and Christian attitudes towards musical instruments. Then I will attempt to provide a theological third-way response.

Instrumental Music in the Hebrew Bible

Jubal “was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Gen. 4:21). Thus, in typical fashion, the Old Testament begins at the beginning with

the origin of musical instruments. We then start to see musical instruments mentioned in connection with anything celebratory. The first such occurrence of musical instruments is in Genesis 31:27 where Laban mentions “mirth and songs.” The more famous references are in 1 Samuel 18:6 where the women sing about how David killed more Philistines than Saul, and in 2 Samuel 6:5 where the Israelites celebrate the ark of the covenant’s journey to Jerusalem. We can also note Jephthah’s daughter greeting him in Judges 11:34 and the celebration of the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 12:27. These verses mention a variety of musical instruments: lyres, harps, castanets, cymbals, and tambourines. Tambourines are used in Israel’s very first act of communal worship led by Miriam the prophetess (Exod. 15:20). The words “musical instruments” in 1 Samuel 18:6 represent the translation of one Hebrew word built on the same root as the word for “three” (*shalishim*), perhaps indicating that it is a three-stringed instrument of some kind. We see something similar in Psalm 92:3 [MT 92:4] in which the word “lute” *asor* is the translation of some unknown instrument based on the same root as the word for “ten” (*eser*). The more typical phrase for “musical instruments” is something that would be translated literally as “vessels of song,” a phrase that post-exilic Old Testament books prefer.

Musical instruments in the Hebrew Bible accompany singing, dancing, and even prophesying (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:5; 1 Chron. 25:1). Sometimes, however, the instruments stand on their own. David’s first role in Saul’s employ is to play the lyre for him (1 Sam. 16:16–23). There is no mention of singing in that pericope. The Hebrew word *niggun* specifically refers to playing a stringed instrument. The text literally states that he played it “with his hand.”

David is as much associated with musical instruments as he is with slaying Philistines. He sets up a Levitical choir and orchestra in the temple, as mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15:16 and 16:4-7 and expands upon it in 1 Chronicles 23 and 25, where we learn that 4,000 musicians were to offer praise to God with musical instruments which David himself made (1 Chron. 23:5). Lest anyone think this is a Davidic innovation, 2 Chronicles. 29:25 explicitly says that the entire thing was God’s idea:

And [Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king’s seer and of Nathan the prophet, for the commandment was from the LORD through his prophets.

So profound is Chronicles' mention of musical instruments that John Kleinig argues that the music in the temple manifests the glory of God. The text says the cloud of God's presence filled the temple "when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals, and other musical instruments" (2 Chron. 5:13–14). This would have been particularly significant for the post-exilic community because, as far as we can tell, the second temple was never filled with the cloud as was the first temple. Thus, we can infer that the psalmody in the second temple, with the instrumental music, symbolized God's presence dwelling among the people.¹

And we have not yet mentioned the Psalms, nor do we have space to do justice to them. There is no word for "poem" in classical Hebrew. Poems are called *shirim*—"songs." Thus, the poems of the Hebrew Bible are really lyrics. This is the reason I refer to the psalms as "songs without music."² The psalms are lyrics whose music is lost to us. The musicality of the psalms, however, is ubiquitous. Not only are they songs that mention singing, but many of them also mention musical instruments directly. For example, in Psalm 33 we read:

Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
Make melody to him on the harp of ten strings!
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts
(Ps. 33:2–3 [MT 33: 3–4]).

Psalm 43:4 reads, "I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God." "Awake, my glory! Awake O harp and lyre!" exclaims Psalm 57:8 [MT 57:9]. Psalm 92 calls for declaring God's steadfast love "to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre" (Ps. 92:3 [MT 92:4]). There are many more such examples in the Psalter. The prevalence of musical instruments in the Psalms implies that they are as fundamental to worshipping God as is singing.

The superscriptions of the psalms also mention musical instruments. We see this as early as Psalm 4, where the superscription calls for the piece to be sung with "stringed instruments" (presumably various kinds of lyres and harps). Some further examples include the superscription of Psalm 5 calling for "flutes" and the superscription of Psalm 6 again calling

¹ John W. Kleinig, "Chronicles, and Church Music," *Logia* 21, no. 3 (2012): 54.

² This is title of the chapter on the psalms in my book: Jonathan Teram, *Illuminating Counsel: How the Least Holy Books of the Hebrew Bible Explore Life's Most Important Issues* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 41.

for “stringed instruments.” The directions also contain what are perhaps the names of melodies, only some of which we can translate, such as the “Doe of the Dawn” in Psalm 22, as well as musical or liturgical words, the most famous of which is *selah*, which is scattered throughout. It is remarkable how musical the Hebrew Bible is!

Musical Instruments in the New Testament

While the New Testament contains snippets of hymns which are perhaps the oldest writings of the New Testament (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:16), there is far less poetry in the New Testament than its Hebrew counterpart. There are also fewer references to musical instruments. Most of the New Testament’s references to musical instruments are not related to the worship of the church. Jesus tells a parable where he says the people of his generation are like children who do not follow the rules of the game: they do not dance at the sound of the flute and they do not mourn at the singing of the dirge (Matt. 11:16–17). The parable of the Prodigal Son mentions “music and dancing” as part of the celebration of the return of the father’s younger son (Luke 15:25). In 1 Corinthians 13:1 and 14:7, Paul uses musical instruments as illustrations of various principles. He makes similar analogies with sports (1 Cor. 9:24–27). The Gospels and the Epistles state the parousia will be announced with the sound of the trumpet (Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16).

The only book of the New Testament to mention musical instruments as part of worship is Revelation. There we read not only about trumpets but also harps (Rev. 5:8; 14:2). One verse even refers to the “harps of God” (Rev. 15:2). However, all the references to harps in Revelation are to heavenly worship, not earthly worship. When it comes to the church, what we see again and again in the New Testament is singing with no mention of instruments. In Ephesians 5:19, Paul instructs the church to sing and “make melody to the Lord with your heart” (cf. Col. 3:16; James 5:13). Compare that to Psalm 33:2 which says to “make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.” Of course, the Hebrew Bible does say, “I will sing and make melody with all my being [literally “all my glory”] (Ps. 108:1 [MT 2]). The point, though, is that the only instrument in Paul’s instructions is the strings of one’s heart.

Musical Instruments in Jewish and Christian Worship

The synagogue is perhaps the greatest religious innovation in the ancient world, for it was the first religious institution to be divorced

from animal sacrifices. The synagogue, therefore, was not patterned after the temple. The temple was the domain of the priests, whereas the synagogue was run by the laity. The temple was the center of sacrifices and prayer, whereas the synagogue was a house of learning. Since prayers were accompanied by musical instruments, and since prayer was not the primary function of the synagogue, it is reasonable to presume that the synagogue was devoid of instruments from the start.³

The destruction of the temple in 70 AD changed the situation dramatically. It is then that the synagogue inherited the role as the primary house of prayer among the Jewish people wherever they were scattered around the world. God, no longer symbolically tied to Jerusalem, was now viewed as present wherever ten Jewish men were in a synagogue. Prayer replaced sacrifice, and emphasis was placed on the study of Torah. Even though prayers were sung, and psalms eventually became a part of the synagogue liturgy, musical instruments were never used in the synagogue. The reasons for this are unclear. It has been argued that musical instruments were forbidden because the Jewish people are in perpetual mourning due to the destruction of the temple. For instance, Sotah 9:12 in the Mishnah states, "From the day the temple was destroyed, there is no day that does not include a curse." It is also argued that the rabbis associated musical instruments with pagan rituals or immoral banquets. And it is supposed that playing instruments is a violation of the Sabbath. These are all speculations, since there is no direct statement in the Talmud that explicitly prohibits instruments.⁴

The church fathers, on the other hand, were not shy about their disdain for musical instruments. Hyun-Ah Kim states that, for the church fathers, "music was not primarily a matter of aesthetics, but of ethics."⁵ They associated musical instruments with pagan rituals and thus viewed musical instruments as being immoral, carnal, and unfitting for Christian worship. "If people occupy their time with pipes, psalteries, choirs, dances, Egyptian clapping of hands, and such disorderly frivolities, they become quite immodest," said Clement of Alexandria.

³ See Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 61.

⁴ See James W. McKinnon, "The Exclusion of Musical Instruments from the Synagogue," in *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 106 (1979–1980): 77–87.

⁵ Hyun-Ah Kim, "Erasmus on Sacred Music," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 8, no. 3 (Dec 2006): 292.

He argues elsewhere that “we no longer employ the ancient psalter, trumpet, timbrel, and flute.” He goes on to prohibit certain “chromatic harmonies” because “they lead persons to effeminacy and indecency.” Clement knew full well that the psalms said things like “Praise him on the lyre,” but it is not a problem since the lyre is “the mouth struck by the Spirit” and the “tongue is the psalter of the Lord.” Likewise, Tertullian writes, “What trumpet of God is now heard—unless it is in the entertainments of the heretics?” Novatian, speaking of the “hoarse, warlike clanging of the trumpet” and the pipe, says, “Even if these were not dedicated to idols, they should not be approached and gazed upon by faithful Christians.” And Cyprian states that “[Satan] tests the ears with harmonious music, so that by the hearing of sweet sounds, he may relax and weaken Christian vigor.”⁶

Many in the West tend to overlook the practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Worship in the Orthodox Church has always been *a cappella*. It is the Roman Catholic Church which eventually added instruments into its worship, beginning with the organ. The Reformers were divided on the matter. Luther was in favor of musical instruments in worship, whereas Zwingli and Calvin were not. Luther argued silence in Scripture was permissive. Zwingli argued silence was prohibitive. Both Zwingli and Calvin believed that the Old Testament example of temple worship has no bearing on the life of the church.⁷

Then came the nineteenth century American movement known as the Restoration Movement, led by Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. The idea behind the Restoration Movement is that Christian denominations could unite by stripping away tradition and, in doing so, restore primitive faith and practice as revealed in the Scriptures. This unity would then usher in the millennial reign. Thus, the Church of Christ, which arose from this movement, promotes *a cappella* singing in worship as a matter of doctrine. Taking a Zwinglian approach to the text, the New Testament’s lack of command regarding playing an instrument in worship is interpreted as being prohibitive. God did not authorize the use of musical instruments and thus no one has the authority to add

⁶ For the early church quotes in this paragraph, see “Music, Musical Instruments,” in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David W. Bercot (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 467–68.

⁷ Jonathan M. Lyons, “From Silence to Golden: The Slow Integration of Instruments into Christian Worship,” *Musical Offerings* 8 (2017): 17.

them to the worship assembly.⁸ The two churches of the Restoration Movement—the Church of Christ and the Christian Church—officially split in 1906 over the issue of instrumental music.

Instrumental Music as Part of the Life of Godliness

There are many ways to respond to all of this. Against the church fathers, we can say that there is no such thing as “immoral” music. While people have viewed music through a moral lens right down to the modern era (think of the objections to rock-and-roll when it first came out), music is, in fact, amoral. It is only lyrics, which express ideas, that can fall into the binary categories of moral and immoral. Remember the mention of Jubal being the father of musical instruments. Jonathan Sacks argues that Genesis’s mention of Jubal and his role is not endowed with any “special significance,” i.e., it is neither good nor bad.⁹ Jonathan Friedmann looks at it another way. He argues that the mention of the invention of musical instruments by Jubal sandwiched between the invention of tents and livestock by Jubal’s brother, Jabal (Gen. 4:20), and the invention of “all instruments of iron and bronze”—i.e., tools—by their half-brother, Tubal-Cain (Gen. 4:22), implies that “herding, metal forging, and music making are the three fundamental professions upon which humanity depends.”¹⁰ Indeed, one can scarcely think of a society that is devoid of music. To paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, life would not be worth living without music. In that sense—the sense that music has the power to elevate life—we could say that music is a good thing. But God was not so impressed by the music of the harp that he accepted hypocritical and vain worship (Amos 5:23; 6:4–7). The lovely sound of the harp did not turn injustice into justice. And certainly, instrumental music has been used in immoral and pagan settings. In Daniel 3:5, for example, instrumental music is used to signal the time to worship the idol that Nebuchadnezzar erected. This does not mean instrumental music is moral or immoral. Like almost anything else, music that is used for evil must not be destroyed but liberated and redirected so that it is used for good.

⁸ J. Charles H. Roberson, “The Meaning and Use of *Psallo* (Part I): A Study of Words Formed on the Root *Psa* and Other Matters Pertaining to the Problem: ‘Did Early Christians Use Instrumental Music in the Worship of God?’” *Restoration Quarterly* 6 (1962): 19.

⁹ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 79.

¹⁰ Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Synagogue Song: An Introduction to Concepts, Theories, and Customs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 11.

Music is in the realm of aesthetics, not ethics. Aesthetically, some music is banal and poorly structured, to put it charitably. Such music may be offensive to the ears, but that does not make it immoral. If lyrics are attached to music, the lyrics may be immoral but the music itself (the melody, harmony, orchestration, rhythm, etc.) would not be.

Having said that, the fact that so many venerated Christian thinkers over the centuries have had problems with using instruments in worship ought to cause us to think twice before dismissing their arguments as archaic or legalistic. And even if their arguments are those things, and even if there is nothing intrinsically wrong with using instruments in worship, should we then presume that there can be no abuse of instruments in worship? Surely there is a line between worship and entertainment. When we see churches across the United States produce shallow biblical instruction but heart-pumping music performed by popular bands, should we not conclude that that line has been crossed?

I would like to move aside from these debates—aside, not past—and offer a role for instrumental music within the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) that does not involve accompanying singing. It is unfortunate that so many people view instrumental music as being the servant of vocal music; the piano seems to be the servant of servants. Sergei Rachmaninoff intentionally named his sonata for cello and piano “Sonata in G minor for Cello and Piano,” rather than just “Cello Sonata,” for the piano is an equal partner to the cello. The piece is a cello and piano duet, not a cello solo with piano accompaniment.

I would like to point out a striking feature of Psalm 150, the final psalm. The psalm is short enough to quote in full:

Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
 praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds;
 praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
Praise him with trumpet sound;
 praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
 praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
 praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

As James Limburg points out, this psalm tells the reader what to do (praise the Lord), where to do it (in the sanctuary and firmament), why to do it (for his mighty deeds), and how to do it (with instruments and dancing).¹¹ Furthermore, Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger point out that all the instrumental families are represented: brass (trumpet), strings (harp), percussion (tambourine and cymbals), and winds (pipe).¹²

Yet there are two more noteworthy aspects of this psalm. The first is that the psalm is eschatological. There may not be a developed eschatological scheme such as the series of events that became fundamental to Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. There is no talk here of the end of the world and the resurrection. However, the psalm's ambition is to see "everything that breathes" praising God. "Everything that breathes" might be understood as a double entendre, referring to the "breath" of musical instruments as well as the breath of every person. If we take Psalm 148 into consideration, we could interpret "everything that breathes" to include the non-human creation. "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, shining stars!" (Ps 148:3). Either way, since "everything that breathes" did not praise God in the psalmist's day, nor in ours, we must presume that this vision will only be realized in the "age to come." Therefore, to interpret Psalm 150 as being merely a part of the "old covenant" is to misunderstand it.

The second point is that singing is not mentioned in Psalm 150. The last time singing is mentioned in the Psalter is in the penultimate psalm. Psalm 149 says, "Sing [*shiru*] to the Lord a new song," (v.1) and "Let the godly... sing for joy [*yeranenu*] on their beds" (v.5). These words are absent from Psalm 150, which mentions dancing but not singing. All the expressions of praise in Psalm 150 are nonverbal. According to Miriyam Glazer, Psalm 150 "brings the whole series to a jubilant climax by reaching beyond words, and even beyond prayer, to whole-body-praise."¹³

There is an irony here. The Psalter represents the height of classical Hebrew poetry, yet the last psalm in the Psalter seems to imply that even artistically arranged words cannot express certain feelings. We see this in Psalm 19. The first verse of poetry in that psalm reads, "The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

¹¹ James Limburg, *Psalms for Sojourners* (Minneapolis, Fortress: 2002), 93.

¹² Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 635.

¹³ Miriyam Glazer, *Psalms of the Jewish Liturgy: A Guide to Their Beauty, Power, and Meaning: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Aviv, 2009), loc. 1028-31, Kindle.

Then the text says, “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.” The subject of this line should probably be understood to be the “firmament,” not the “day” and the “night.” In other words, the text should be understood to mean, “Day to day *the firmament* pours forth speech.” The third line says, “There is no speech, there are no words; their voice is not heard.” The ESV changes the natural meaning of the Hebrew by translating it, “There is no speech, nor are there words, *whose* voice is not heard”—as if to imply that *all* of the speech of the heavens and the firmament is indeed heard far and wide. According to the ESV, *everything is heard*. Better, though, is to realize the strange tension inherent in the Hebrew. The firmament pours forth *speech*, and yet “there is no *speech*.” (The two uses of “speech” are the same word in Hebrew). The heavens and the firmament are preaching a wordless, even silent, sermon. If “everything that breathes” in Psalm 150 is meant to refer to the non-human creation, we could interpret the instrumental music of the psalm as giving voice to the voiceless creation.

This is true for human emotions as well. Haim Nachman Bialik said that “God has other languages without words: melody, tears and laughter, all privileged inheritances of this ‘speaking creature.’ These begin where words end, to bring not closure, but new beginnings.”¹⁴ We can illustrate this point in any number of ways. In Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, after Christine pulls off Erik’s mask, revealing the grotesque hideousness of his face, Erik retreats to his room and plays music from his opera on the organ—vocal music turned instrumental. Christine’s description of the music is haunting:

Presently I heard the sound of the organ; and then I began to understand Erik’s contemptuous phrase when he spoke about Opera music. What I now heard was utterly different from what I had heard up to then. His Don Juan Triumphant (for I had not a doubt but that he had rushed to his masterpiece to forget the horror of the moment) seemed to me at first one long, awful, magnificent sob. But, little by little, it expressed every emotion, every suffering of which mankind is capable.¹⁵

If there is any piece of existing music that could be described as “one

¹⁴ From “The Revealed and the Hidden in Language” as quoted in Benjamin Segal, *A New Psalm: Psalms as Literature* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2013), 693.

¹⁵ Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera* (Ann Arbor, MI: Borders Classics, 2006), 108.

long, awful, magnificent sob,” surely it is Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*, which entered popular culture due to Oliver Stone’s use of it in his film *Platoon*. Words cannot sufficiently describe the poignancy that *Adagio for Strings* expresses. The melodic line is expansive and develops so gradually, so measuredly, that it is not easily hummable. The piece is written in B-flat minor, but it stays as far from the tonic as possible, thereby extending the emotional tension. The piece was composed in 1936 and it is difficult to imagine Barber not being influenced by the Great Depression. After the atrocity of 9/11, Leonard Slatkin conducted *Adagio for Strings* at the Royal Albert Hall in England in memory of the victims. How fitting! One cannot help but think of Paul’s words in Romans 8:26—there are sighs, or groanings, “too deep for words.”

It is no wonder, then, that instrumental music is a God-given means of healing. First Samuel 16:14-23 may feature an unusual ailment, but it is nonetheless a healing pericope.¹⁶ David’s lyre-playing for King Saul is a biblical example of music therapy.¹⁷ Music heals because its beauty triggers the release of emotions. Erich Fromm, writing about the power of lament in the Psalms, states: “The cure of despair is not achieved by encouraging thoughts, not even by feeling part of the despair; it is achieved by the seeming paradox that despair *can be overcome only if it has been fully experienced*.”¹⁸ For this reason, following David’s example, there is a push for pastors to incorporate music therapy in their pastoral ministry.¹⁹

This is not to say instrumental music is only useful if it is expressing lamentations. Consider the ecstatic Hassidic *niggun* (“melody” in Hebrew). This is a form of wordless singing—a Jewish vocalise. While it can express lamentation, it is commonly used to express joy.²⁰ The idea is that just as some grief is indescribable, so too all human tongues lack the vocabulary to express the peace that transcends understanding.²¹

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 125.

¹⁷ See John Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 51.

¹⁸ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 208 (italics original).

¹⁹ Donald C. Houts, “The Structured Use of Music in Pastoral Psychotherapy.” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 35, no. 3 (September 1981): 197.

²⁰ Keith Harris-Kahn and Marcus Moberg, “Religious Popular Music: Between the Instrumental, Transcendent, and Transgressive,” *Temenos* 48 (2012): 101.

²¹ Simon Jacobson, *Toward a Meaningful Life, New Edition: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), loc. 225, Kindle.

Instrumental music can also be emotionally ambiguous and complex. Take, for example, Johannes Brahms's *Intermezzo in A major* from his *Six Pieces for Piano*, Op. 118. This piece was dedicated to Clara Schumann, the brilliant woman with whom Brahms was hopelessly in love, while her husband (Brahms's friend and mentor, Robert) lay sick in hospital. They are probably classical music's most famous love triangle, though there is no evidence that Brahms and Clara ever had a physical relationship. After Robert tragically died in 1856, Brahms did not propose to Clara. Both remained unmarried until death, though they never stopped writing to each other. Brahms's last letter to her was on May 8, 1896, in which he thanked her for wishing him a happy birthday. She died twelve days later. Brahms followed suit in eleven months' time.²²

This piece then—all of Op. 118 but especially the *Intermezzo in A major*—is the sound of unattainable love. The minor seventh interval, so prominent throughout, gives off the feeling of profound longing. It yearns for the octave but cannot seem to reach it. When it finally does, it lasts but a moment before the music reverts to the emotional complexity that marked the beginning. Thus, the piece is neither happy nor sad; rather, it is an elegant mixture of the joys and sorrows of knowing and adoring a beautiful soul with what C.S. Lewis called “appreciative love.”²³ If words were added to the music, they would short-circuit the composer's intention, for words would cause the music to choose emotional sides, and the music would lose its sublime ambiguity. As wonderful as vocal music is, instrumental music can do things vocal music cannot.

While Brahms's relationship with Clara might seem a rather odd example of godly music, it suits the mood of the psalms well. The same Psalter that says, “Let everything that breathes praise the LORD,” also states, “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1). In fact, the same psalm that says, “I will sing to the LORD for he has dealt bountifully with me” (Ps. 13:6), also says, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps. 13:1). These sentiments may be contradictory, but they are real. The psalms demand authenticity above all. One can scarcely think of a biblical book that has a better understanding of the human condition. Ironically, the abstractness of instrumental music brings out the complexities of the human psyche in a way that might be more difficult for vocal music to

²² See further, Berthold Litzmann, ed., *Letters of Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms, 1853-1896*, vol. 2 (New York: Vienna House, 1973), 298.

²³ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 16.

achieve. Instrumental music can have more complex melodies than is possible in vocal music. Take Alexander Scriabin's *Two Impromptus*, Op. 10, for example. This piano piece would be unsingable as a vocal piece, yet it is bursting with melody and saturated with rich harmonies. Boris Pasternak said of it, "The melodies, mingling with the tears, run straight along your nerves to your heart, and you weep not because you feel sad, but because the way to your heart has been found so unerringly and so shrewdly."²⁴ One cannot help but think of the declaration in Psalm 139:2, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me!"

One viewer, after watching a YouTube video of Itzhak Perlman playing the Beethoven violin concerto, noted the irony of it, commenting, "How can anyone feel sorry for him/herself after listening to this music played by a man who can't walk and composed by a man who couldn't hear?"²⁵ Sacks, in noting not only Beethoven's struggles with deafness (he was near suicide at one point because of it) but also the struggles of other classical musicians, said, "Happiness, these lives seem to say, is not the absence of suffering but the ability to take its fractured discords and turn them into music that rescues from the darkest regions of the soul a haunting yet humanizing beauty—surely the supreme achievement down here on earth."²⁶ Indeed, if it is the case that the greatest work of God is raising life out of death, then surely the greatest work of any human is to take one's curses and turn them into blessings for others. Music turns pain into beauty.

I do not mean to imply that classical music is the only worthy music. To the contrary, it is a wondrous reality that each culture has its own style of music. As my friend Damion put it, "Any genre of music can convey great power." There was a controversy regarding the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which allows instrumental music in worship, but prohibited its use among churches in Zimbabwe. The result was a stifling of the culture of the Zimbabwean Christians.²⁷ At worst, this is rank hypocrisy and an abuse of power. At the very least, it is a denial of

²⁴ Boris Pasternak, *I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Pantheon, 1959), 43–44.

²⁵ Jerry Kopel, comment on YouTube video, Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/cokCg-WPRZPg>.

²⁶ Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, 222–23.

²⁷ Tompson Makamahadze and Fortune Sibanda, "Melodies to God': The Place of Music, Instruments and Dance in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe," *Exchange* 37 (2008): 306.

the right of the Zimbabweans to devote their cultural, instrumental musical expressions to the worship of God. Might making music be a means of peacemaking between people—increasing empathy and decreasing our inclination to violence?

Conclusion

Traditions that utilize instruments in worship ought not to look down upon traditions that do not, and vice versa. Let the practitioners of each tradition be fully convinced in their own minds. My point is not so much about whether it is right or wrong to use instruments in worship, but about the power of music more broadly. The fact that vocal music is so much more prevalent in our culture than instrumental music indicates there is an entire aspect of music that many people are not experiencing. Musical instruments are made for so much more than mere accompaniment.

It is true that words are important, that lyrics enrich music, and that the combination of music and lyrics is potent. I, for one, would not want to live in a world without vocal music. I also understand that, without words, many people would not consider instrumental music to be “sacred.” However, since there is no such thing as a sacred-secular divide in the Bible, we ought not to think of instrumental music as being purely secular. Whatever is to be done is to be done for the glory of God and the good of one’s neighbor. The beauty and power of instrumental music should not be underestimated or ignored, for instrumental music can point one to God, bring healing to hurting souls, and form bonds between cultures. Surely those accomplishments are part and parcel of the *missio Dei*.