

Rethinking the Philosophy of Church Music

Antonius S. Priyanto
Universitas Pelita Harapan
antonius.priyanto@uph.edu

Abstract

This paper argues that a sound philosophy of church music must be rooted in biblical theology, recognizing music as a divinely given medium that reveals God's order within time and creation. It contends that music, when understood theologically, serves not merely as an aesthetic expression but as a formative practice through which believers participate in God's creative and redemptive purposes. In contrast to the modern impulse toward disorder, fragmentation, and instant gratification, music-making embodies the spiritual discipline of patience, attentiveness, and obedience. Drawing on the theological reflections of Jeremy Begbie and others, this study explores how musical structure and temporality mirror the divine harmony between change and order that sustains creation. By reclaiming a theological philosophy of music, the church can resist cultural tendencies toward superficiality and rediscover music as a sacred act of worship that cultivates a meaningful engagement with time and with God's ongoing work in the world.

Keywords: Philosophy of Music, Church Music, Music Ministry, Christian Worldview, Christian Music

One of the most distressing experiences I had as a conductor occurred in 2008, when I led a small school orchestra performing excerpts from Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor. Midway through the concert, one of the musicians intentionally disrupted the performance. The concert was intended as an end-of-semester showcase involving both students and their teachers. Participation was mandatory for students enrolled in the orchestra class but voluntary for the instrumental tutors.

After the performance, I investigated the incident and was dismayed to learn that several tutors were dissatisfied due to the absence of an additional "professional musician" fee they had expected, though this had never been formally communicated. The school administration had assumed the tutors were participating voluntarily as educators supporting their students, while some tutors viewed themselves as professional performers entitled to extra compensation. This misunderstanding revealed a clear gap in expectations and communication.

Nevertheless, I could not help but question: why sacrifice the integrity of the music and betray the audience's trust over such a misunderstanding? In later years, my colleagues and I would jokingly recall the event as a "Mess in B Minor." Yet behind the humor lay a serious realization: the incident

became a turning point that prompted us to rethink our educational philosophy and to become more intentional in grounding our music training on solid philosophical foundations.

A Case in Church Music Ministry

It is quite common for music students to earn additional income by performing at cafés, weddings, corporate events, or by teaching and playing music in local churches. I once engaged in a discussion with a group of student musicians about the concept of music ministry. A heated debate emerged when I asked whether church musicians should be compensated for their service.

In Indonesia, most local churches operate on a voluntary basis for their music ministries. However, some denominations are known for providing generous remuneration to their worship musicians. Some students argued that it was unfair for churches not to financially support musicians who dedicate time, energy, and effort to prepare and perform during worship services. They questioned, “Where does all the offering money the church receives go?” Others strongly opposed the idea of being paid for ministry, believing that financial motives compromise the spiritual integrity of service. “What is the point of doing ministry if the motivation is monetary gain?” one student argued.

The discussion revealed diverse perspectives grounded in biblical, theological, and cultural reasoning. The sensitivity and complexity of the issue compelled the students to think beyond surface-level assumptions. They were challenged to examine their underlying beliefs and values that shape how they perceive, think, assess, decide, and act when facing real-world dilemmas. In essence, they were engaging in philosophical reflection.

Although philosophy is concerned with the fundamental questions of life, its implications profoundly affect practical decision-making. A philosophy built upon unfounded assumptions about reality weakens one’s capacity to evaluate real-world issues accurately. Conversely, a philosophy grounded in truth offers a clearer understanding of reality, enabling individuals to form sound judgments and act with discernment.

Why Philosophy of Church Music Matter?

As both a scholar and a church musician, I believe that developing a sound philosophical understanding of the nature and purpose of church music is of paramount importance. The cases presented earlier represent only a small portion of the many challenges faced by church musicians and scholars alike. The continual shift in popular preferences and cultural identities—often alienating one

generation from another—has profoundly influenced church culture and identity. As a subculture within the broader society, the church continually negotiates its values and principles, sometimes at the expense of unity. Indeed, many denominational divisions have historically been shaped or even caused by differing musical preferences.

It is worth pausing to ask: Is the diversity of musical preferences or expressions something to be pursued or avoided? Should churches, for the sake of unity, agree upon and standardize the type of music used in worship? Or should they instead strive to embrace diversity as a reflection of the body of Christ?

Furthermore, how should local churches respond to the contemporary challenges posed by social theology, the prosperity gospel, feminism, and the gender revolution—movements that have redefined both the form and content of worship? In the digital age, where virtual presence increasingly replaces physical gathering, should the church adopt virtual representation in its corporate worship? Could regular Sunday services take place in the metaverse, where avatars stand in place of congregants?

Lastly, how should the church respond to the commodification of art and music—gifts that Martin Luther once described as the noblest after God’s Word—when, in the age of industrialism and capitalism, their value and purpose are increasingly reduced to mere commodities to be bought and sold for profit?

The church today faces a multitude of challenges that threaten its identity and relevance in the modern world. Are we not called to be the salt and light of the world? If the church becomes absorbed into the currents of popular culture and loses distinction from its surroundings, can it still fulfill that calling? When places of worship—meant to be the center of Christian life—are fashioned to mirror the aesthetics and practices of popular culture, how can the church discern whether its values and identity remain rooted in the gospel or have been conformed to worldly standards?

The list of pressing questions confronting the church is indeed vast and often bewildering. This is why philosophical reflection is essential not only for church scholars and theologians but also for lay Christians who seek to understand the reasons behind their beliefs and actions. Engaging in philosophical thinking allows individuals to examine the fundamental assumptions that underlie their understanding of reality, faith, and practice. Every perspective rests upon a framework of assumptions—acknowledged or unacknowledged—that shape how we perceive and interpret the world.

In this light, the “Mess in B Minor” incident I described earlier remains a lamentable example. I regarded it as such because I assumed the importance of commemorating and celebrating the mystery

embodied in the act of music-making, the value of aesthetic experience, and the ethical responsibility of respecting the audience above monetary interest. That, I believed, is what a true artist ought to uphold—and what society naturally expects of its artist-musicians. Moreover, this conviction lies at the heart of our academic mission: to educate students to become genuine artist-musicians, capable of embodying integrity, artistry, and communal responsibility. It was therefore deeply painful to witness a moment intended for collective beauty and reflection devolve into a public disruption of harmony and a betrayal of the shared values that sustain it.

Sound Theology as Foundation

Church music scholar Dr. David W. Music asserts, “While there are skill sets and repertoire that must be learned in a church music education, the most important element is to develop a philosophy of church music that is biblically based and theologically and culturally sound. Styles and repertoire will come and go, but the development of a solid philosophy will enable future church musicians to negotiate these changes.”(Music, 2012)

This statement is dense with meaning. Written within the context of curricular design for church music education, it emphasizes the paramount importance of cultivating a sound philosophy of church music. Aware of the complex challenges that church musicians face, Dr. Music highlights philosophical formation as an essential competency for those serving in this ministry. Implicit in his argument is the assumption that church musicians occupy a crucial role in the life of the church.

Church musicians are not merely performers who “come, play, and get paid.” This is not to oppose the practice of providing fair financial support for their service; rather, it is to clarify that the true dilemma, as illustrated in the earlier cases, lies in differing assumptions about the hierarchy of values used to assess such situations. For instance, a musician who serves primarily for financial gain may prioritize compensation above all else. Such a person might even agree to serve in a congregation whose doctrinal beliefs contradict their own, provided the remuneration meets their expectations. Whether such an act can genuinely be considered ministry is highly questionable.

It would be easy to render moral judgments about these scenarios, yet doing so would contribute little to deeper understanding. Instead of prescribing a single solution, it is more constructive to examine how one should assess such situations and arrive at sound conclusions. This is precisely what Dr. Music underscores in his statement: the necessity of developing a philosophy of church music that is biblically grounded, theologically coherent, and culturally discerning. Every church or institution operates from an implicit philosophy of music—whether consciously articulated

or not. The question, therefore, is not whether a philosophy exists, but whether the philosophy one embraces is biblically sound.

Hierarchy also plays a decisive role in shaping such philosophy. Dr. Music presupposes a hierarchy of authority that places Scripture as the highest standard of reference for developing a sound philosophy of church music. All truth claims used in constructing this philosophy should ultimately conform to biblical truth. Some might argue that interpretations of biblical truth vary, and indeed, they do. This is precisely why theology is indispensable—not just any theology, but sound theology.

Why does this matter? The difference between sound and unsound theology is comparable to the difference between accepting whether the earth is round or flat, or whether the earth or the sun is the center of the solar system. The advancement of natural science and human civilization depends on accurate foundational assumptions. Likewise, church music—and indeed Christian thought as a whole—requires warranted and truthful assumptions to construct coherent theology and to formulate meaningful, practical responses to real-world issues.

If that principle holds true for science, does it not also apply to theology? I believe it does. Our ability to assess, judge, and draw conclusions—whether in spiritual matters or in all aspects of life—is profoundly shaped by our theology. Sound theology provides a truthful understanding of reality that encompasses the past, present, and future. The grand biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation offers a coherent framework of reality upon which our worldview and understanding can rest.

Sound theology presupposes both the coherence and inerrancy of Scripture. This means that the Bible cannot contradict itself, and that every interpretation must align with the overarching truth of Scripture. Faulty interpretations often arise when isolated verses are removed from their context and their meanings subtly altered to support a narrative inconsistent with the biblical message.

Affirming biblical inerrancy entails accepting the entirety of the written Word—in its original manuscripts—as divinely inspired and free from error, and treating it as the final authority on truth. Conversely, rejecting inerrancy opens the door to interpretive relativism, in which Scripture becomes subject to validation by other sources of authority. When biblical truth is subordinated to reason, experience, tradition, or personal revelation, theological confusion inevitably follows.

Having established the necessity of philosophical reflection, the next question concerns the appropriate method of inquiry—how can theology and culture be studied in a way that allows each to complement the other in revealing the nature of church music?

Approach to studying Church Music

Dealing with church music is a complex enterprise. Church music rests at the intersection of theology and cultural study. Developing a biblically grounded, theologically coherent, and culturally informed philosophy requires attentiveness to both culture and theology. Approaching church music purely from a cultural perspective—through the lens of the social sciences, particularly ethnography and anthropology—can describe what is but cannot evaluate it from the theological perspective of what should be. In this sense, a normative approach becomes essential. The question then arises: how do theology and the social sciences relate?

A persistent issue is that theologians have often failed to do justice to church music practitioners, tending to constrain them with doctrines that rarely speak the language of music. Conversely, scholars who approach church music as a cultural phenomenon sometimes, as Stanley Hauerwas critically noted, “methodologically preclude the theological claims necessary for the church’s intelligibility.” (Elizabeth Phillips, 2012)

Several scholars have sought to propose integrative models that approach theology culturally or study culture theologically. Elizabeth Phillips’ work, *Charting the Ethnographic Turn: Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations*, is particularly noteworthy, emphasizing the importance of testing doctrine through “contact with lived experience” (Phillips, 2012). Within Christianity, the Bible—as the ultimate standard of truth—is understood not merely as a set of detached rules but as an accurate portrayal of reality itself (Grudem, 1994). Viewed from this perspective, an integrative ethnographic and anthropological approach to church music opens avenues for constructive dialogue with theology. However, finding a harmonious approach that satisfies both theological and cultural dimensions is by no means an easy endeavor.

Such an endeavor, though promising, may require theologians to step out of their desks and libraries to engage with people’s lived experiences, observing through the social scientist’s lens to understand complex social realities—without compromising their fundamental theological assumptions, as Phillips and Ward suggest (Elizabeth Phillips, 2012, p. 105).

Theological Significance of Music

The theological significance of music has been the subject of debate for centuries. Responding to the absence of a systematic explanation of music’s theological meaning, Mark David Parsons proposes a preliminary framework for a theology of music by identifying the relationship among text, tone, and context in liturgical song (Parsons, 2005, pp. 54–69). He outlines three competing models

in the field of Christian music theology, each emphasizing one of these aspects.

The first model gives priority to the text. In this logocentric model, the theological meaning of music rests in the text itself. Musical properties have no intrinsic meaning apart from supporting the words. Consequently, music that is not associated with a sacred text is regarded as neutral or even negative, while music that obscures or distorts the text is to be avoided. Music is viewed as a secondary mode of expression that serves the text. As Parsons explains, “the theological significance of music in worship resides outside of music and inheres within the propositional content of the text that music might accompany” (p. 56).

The second model prioritizes the tonal properties of music. In this approach, music possesses intrinsic theological value in worship as a form of deep symbolic expression that extends beyond verbal meaning. Parsons elaborates that music becomes integral to worship as a liturgical symbol: “In worship, music has the symbolic potential to bear sacred meaning as sheer molded sound” (p. 60). When correlated with other constitutive symbols of the liturgy and brought into interaction with human subjects, music expresses and shapes emotions that form the Christian life.

The third model emphasizes context. Here, the significance of music rests in its functional role within the ritual process. Music’s theological meaning emerges as it fulfills its purpose in enhancing participation in the liturgy (Parsons, 2005).

Although the first and third models have attracted greater scholarly attention, the theological significance of music’s internal properties has been explored by only a few researchers, including Edward Foley, Judith Marie Kubicki, Suzanne Langer, Thomas Polani, Don Saliers, and Albert Blackwell. Parsons also highlights Jeremy Begbie’s work in *Theology, Music and Time*, which invites consideration of how the intrinsic characteristics of musical sound can contribute to systematic theology—particularly in relation to soteriology, eucharistic theology, and eschatology—independent of their association with liturgical texts or narratives (Begbie, 2000). Begbie’s work is particularly noteworthy, as he eloquently articulates the profound theological significance of music-making. He approaches theology through the lens of a deeply informed musician, offering a distinctive and insightful perspective that bridges the disciplines of music and theology.

Music, Time, and Divine Order

The different views and attitudes toward church music can be traced back even among the Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli. Martin Luther had the most positive view and attitude toward music among the three. As we perceive from his reflections, Luther regarded

music highly: “I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God... that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise” (Luther, as cited in Leaver, 2017, p. 35). Luther viewed music as a gift of God. This fundamental premise distinguishes the Christian view of music from the naturalistic viewpoint. Many philosophical discourses about music embrace a naturalistic view of the world, where music has no intrinsic value or purpose other than its evolutionary or social function for survival. In the Christian worldview, music finds its origin in the very fabric of God’s purposeful creational design.

The biblical story of creation begins with the creation of space, time, and matter. When God said, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), He set forth time (beginning), space (heavens), and matter (earth) by means of sonic utterance. Ancient philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, and Boethius acknowledged the embeddedness of music in the harmony of the universe. Music reflects the temporal patterns that permeate the order of creation: planetary motion, the cycle of seasons, and the rhythm of day, week, month, and year.

Music is a temporal art, which means it requires time to exist. One of the essential aspects of music is rhythm. Elliott Carter describes rhythm as the way music moves through time. A good composer knows how to articulate time and work with rhythm. The character of a musical piece is largely shaped by the way rhythm is organized. We may wonder what enables people to sit quietly for more than an hour listening to Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9. Listening to good music helps people to experience time as meaningful and enjoyable. The element of equilibrium–disequilibrium–release (EDR) drives the music forward and keeps the audience expectantly waiting for the grand resolution. Music teaches us to wait patiently; it teaches us to experience time meaningfully.

One of the characteristics of time, as we know it, is that it has a beginning and an end. Time is directional. The grand biblical narrative can only be understood within this framework. Time, as given to us, encompasses the past, present, and future, all set in continuous motion toward its fulfillment. The acclamation, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” marks the start of historical time. Every event in human life takes place within a particular historical moment. Human existence is thus constrained by temporality.

Is there meaning in that temporal existence?

The book of Ecclesiastes presented two different perspectives of life: life under the sun and life under heaven. There is nothing new under the sun. What has been will be again; what has been done will be done again (Ecc. 1:9). Under the sun, things seem to be moving through time in an endless circle, without meaning. Life under the sun is doomed to meaninglessness, utter

meaninglessness. In contrast, time under heaven is full of meaning. When it's perceived from God's perspective, every event in human history is there for a purpose by design. (Ecc. 3:1-8). The way life is being viewed determines its meaning. I found great similarities here when we apply to our understanding of musical time.

What does it have to do with music?

The temporality of human life and its meaningfulness or meaninglessness is represented in how music is constructed and how time is perceived. Music takes time in order to exist. Rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, western traditional music is largely linear and directional. The linearity of tonal music rests in the continuity of each musical event. Every note in tonal music never stands alone but is always there either as an implication of the previous note(s) or as an anticipation for the next one. Every movement in tonal music is directed toward a certain goal at the micro and macro level. Every musical sentence in western traditional music is phrased with a certain cadence at its end. The cadence becomes the goal of every musical phrase at the micro level. In a musical composition, every section is marked by the statement of the big cadence that may lead to the next section, and so on until the music arrives at the final cadence that marks the end of the musical composition. Listening to such music without that final cadence will leave the audience in an uncomfortable state of waiting and wanting for the resolution.

The idea of tonal centrality, linearity and directionality of music has been challenged by the emergence of modernity that took shape in the movement of modern contemporary music. Modernity as a philosophy of thought is rooted in the naturalistic and materialistic view of the world. The rejection of God's absolute and centrality is reflected in the conception of some modern approaches to music that avoid any tonal references. Yet, such avoidance often results in the formation of a new kind of center—because without any sense of tonal or structural reference, music becomes unintelligible. To be meaningful, music must be understood by its listener. As Landy argues, comprehension requires recognizable elements such as repetition or sonic reference points that listeners can grasp (Landy, 2007).

Another aspect of music that has been challenged is the aspect of linearity and directionality. The driving force that moves the music forward is the element of tension and release. Tension creates imbalance and the desire to move forward, looking for its release. The interplay of tension and release occurs on many levels: one note leads to another, one chord to another chord, one phrase to another phrase, one section to the next section, and so on. Without such tension and release, music is perceived as static and going nowhere. In contrast, many musical traditions influenced by Eastern philosophy

exhibit a “floating” quality, without a sense of forward momentum or goal orientation. Musical events occur without the necessity of progression or resolution, reflecting a worldview in which time is cyclical and boundless, without beginning or end. In such a conception, time simply is—unfolding without inherent purpose or destination.

Responding to the prevailing belief that modernity and social progress necessitate the dismantling of established order, Begbie demonstrates that change and order can coexist harmoniously (Begbie, 2007). The narrative of human fallenness illustrates humanity’s rebellion against God and divine authority. Within the cultural mandate, humankind was entrusted with dominion over creation under God’s sovereignty. However, by rejecting God, humans have often turned dominion into domination. The moral law inscribed in the human heart is frequently perceived as a constraint on freedom, and human creativity tends to transgress the boundaries established for the flourishing of creation. Traces of this impulse to overstep divinely intended limits can be observed across all spheres of human life.

Through music, however, we learn that meaningful movement through time emerges not from abolishing boundaries but from embracing them within creative exploration. Johann Sebastian Bach’s Inventions, for instance, exemplify a rich engagement with the inherent harmonic order of sound. Bach began by discerning the given sonic structures that permeate the universe and, through his innovative craftsmanship, developed them into works of remarkable creativity and depth.

Another strikingly insightful argument that Begbie presents in defense of the theological meaning of music is his claim that music invites us to cultivate a positive kind of patience and waiting. The success of Tik Tok in the competition for subscribers and active social media users rests on its strategic use of short videos. We live in a popular culture that dictates and shapes our appetite for instant gratification and a life without commitment. The tagline “Subscribe now, no commitment, cancel anytime,” used in many advertisements, has proven effective in boosting the number of subscribers. I wonder if the next generation can still sit for an hour, actively listening to the symphonies of great composers such as Beethoven or Mozart, as people did in the past.

Engagement in music-making reminds us of the importance of waiting patiently. The Bible implores us to wait. In the process of waiting, we are called to redeem the time—that is, to engage with time actively and meaningfully. A good piece of music develops its musical materials to lead the listener on a meaningful journey through time. The act of music-making teaches us to engage with time both meaningfully and patiently.

Conclusion

The philosophical reflection on church music invites us to move beyond superficial aesthetic judgments and rediscover music's theological depth within God's creational order. Music, when understood theologically, reveals how structure and freedom, order and creativity, coexist in harmony—mirroring God's own nature and the rhythm of creation itself. To think philosophically about church music is therefore to discern how human sound-making participates in God's redemptive narrative, shaping our imagination, ethics, and worship.

In a culture driven by instant gratification and fragmented attention, the practice of music-making becomes a countercultural act of patience, attentiveness, and embodied faith. It teaches us to engage time meaningfully, to wait, and to listen. Theology, when joined with philosophy and attentive to culture, offers the church a renewed vision of music as more than performance—it is a participation in God's creative and redemptive work. The task of the church musician, then, is not merely to make beautiful sounds but to form a community that lives musically before God: ordered, responsive, and attuned to the divine harmony that holds creation together.

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