

Echoes of Eternity:

A Classical Guide to
MUSIC

Stephen R. Turley, PhD

Series Editor: Stephen R. Turley, PhD





Echoes of Eternity:
A Classical Guide to Music
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To my dear wife, Akiko, whose music and beauty
have graced my life for only thirty years.



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PRELUDE

This book has been a long time coming. First, as a classical guitar performance major, I spent more than eight years of my life at one of the finest music conservatories in the world. Before that, I traveled each Saturday ten hours by train round-trip from New Haven, CT, to Baltimore, MD, to study classical guitar with a master teacher in preparation for my future conservatory years. Those years would include prizes in music competitions and performances on television and in concert halls throughout the United States, as well as Italy and Japan.

And yet it was not until much later in life that I began to reflect on the profound significance of music for the formation of our humanity. While I had always loved music, I am embarrassed to admit that as a performance artist I was more interested in my public persona than my art. Ironically, it was only when I put down the guitar to pursue a teaching career in classical education that the real magnitude of music impressed itself upon me.

Which brings me to the second reason for the protraction of this publication: the long-awaited arrival of its readership. The renewal of classical education over the last few decades affords the opportunity for many of us to rediscover the *classical* notion of music. By “classical,” I’m not referring solely to the music genre by that name, much less to the term used by musicologists and historians to specify that musical period between the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Instead, I mean the conception and practice of music that echoed a universe full of divine meaning and purpose, a cosmos that resonated with stunning correspondences and grand harmonies that became audible in music making and composition.

We in the modern world, so devoted to scientific reasoning and technological progress, have lost largely the mystical meaning of music that accounted for its once formative power. In Jewish, Greek, and Christian traditions, music revealed the world as an arena of divine creation, comprised of symmetries, consonances, and harmonies. By awakening the music of the heavens on earth through the contemplation of divine revelation, we were able to embody such cosmic harmony and thereby transform into heavenly beings. Music was thus deemed integral to the formation of what it meant to be truly human, and was therefore considered a kind of knowledge indispensable to such formation.

As classical educators, administrators, and parents, we often find ourselves at a loss for communicating such a vision of music to our students. In an age of iPods and iPads, commodification and consumerism has redefined not only the world of music, but also the world as expressed and interpreted by music. It is virtually unthinkable among us to hear our Top 40 hits as echoes of a cosmos resonating with divine harmonies, and attempts at teaching such on the part of the educator appear artificially forced if not unintelligible.

This book was written to resolve such obstacles. Its pages provide a rich tapestry of concepts, vocabulary, and listening examples that will equip you to teach and awaken students to a classical vision of music. There is no formal musical education required on your part; while music teachers can certainly benefit from its contents, this book is purposely written with both musicians and nonmusicians in mind. By reading this book, you will be able to:

- discover and express a rich theology of music and music practice;
- explain effectively how the value of music is objective to the listener;
- clarify the difference between classical and contemporary music;

- demonstrate how to analyze music and musical meaning;
- learn ways to incorporate music throughout the school day;
- explain the multiple ways in which music communicates through various cross-cultural examples;
- understand the significance of sound for our human experience.

I have organized the book into three parts. Part I: Sound as Revelation explores music in relation to the larger issue of the significance of sound for our human experience. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historic role of hearing and music in shaping our conceptions of what it means to be human, while chapter 2 explores the profound contribution of sound to our perception of the world, particularly as it relates to a thoroughly mystical notion of reality.

Part II: Echoes of Eternity details what I consider to be indispensable to a rich theology of music. Chapter 3 delineates the unique properties or traits of music that account for its capacity to reveal unseen and otherwise imperceptible realities, which in turn accounts for the mystical sense ascribed to music by cultures throughout the world. In chapter 4, we rediscover the ancient conception of the music of the spheres and its relation to the formation of wisdom and virtue in the listener, and in chapter 5 I sketch a distinctively Christian theology of music from the writings of the early church. Chapter 6 reflects on the moral ambiguity in contemporary Christian music, while chapter 7 provides a summary of the constituents of a theology of music.

Part III: Music Practice finishes our rediscovery with two chapters dedicated to applying our music theology to the analysis, appreciation, and performance of music. Chapter 8 provides an interpretive grid for an aesthetic analysis of music, and chapter 9 expounds on the significance of psalm singing for the Christian life. After a brief postlude, I've included two appendices that continue with the theme of music practice. The first suggests ways to

incorporate music in the classroom throughout the school day, and the second introduces readers to the life and music of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, whom many consider to be the greatest living composer in our time.

All chapters include discussion questions, at least one suggested listening exercise, and a suggested reading list.

And so, this book is in many respects a culmination of a life of music and classical education. As you, the reader, turn its pages, it is my hope that you will glean from its words the profound significance of song for the realization of our humanity. I desire nothing less than to inspire you to make the same discovery that has so astonished me, to encounter the melodies of redemption that interweave into sonic harmonies that hearken us back to the sounds of Paradise, that awaken us to the echoes of eternity, leading us back to our original and eternal home.

PART I
Sound as Revelation



CHAPTER ONE

Life Is Beautiful: Music as Revelation

1. DISCOVERIES IN A SONIC GARDEN

I began playing guitar at the age of twelve, shortly after my father died. His death had a devastating effect on me. I withdrew from all the sporting events in which I was involved, and I became more and more secluded from friends and activities. My mother, in an effort to persuade me to be more outgoing, suggested that I learn to do something constructive, such as play an instrument. I then remembered how I had always wanted to play the guitar.

My love for music was fostered by my paternal grandfather, Harold G. Turley, who emigrated from England in the early 1920s as the first full-time research chemist for Rohm and Haas. He settled with his wife, Cecilia, and four children in a large, stone-front Dutch colonial home in Moorestown, NJ. My cousins called the home “the castle,” for it was in fact an inexhaustible treasure trove of stairwells, pantries, attic spaces, books, and basement that awakened a veritable Narnia within our childlike imaginations. And it was there, in that magical cottage, with guitar in hand absent my father’s touch, that I discovered music.

My grandfather devoted his retirement years to two things: rose gardening and listening to classical music. As I settle into midlife, I recognize more and more the profound sympathy between these two practices. The invisible fragrance of the garden in a very real way becomes audible through the comparably invisible waves of

melodies, which intertwine in harmony with the symphony of scents from the bouquet of blossoming flowers. Like gardening, music finds its life in time; it wraps itself up with calendrical seasons and chapters of life, marking rites of passage from birthdays to graduations, weddings to funerals. Its sonic perfume breathes into our innermost beings, imprinting itself in our minds and resounding in our imaginations, and attaches itself to our bodies, sanctifying our senses with a seemingly inexhaustible source of ineluctable delight.

2. THE WORLD OF SOUND AND THE ECLIPSE OF THE VISUAL

I have come to appreciate that the world of sound is both a unique and indispensable dimension of our humanity. While sight is directional, in that my visual experience of the world is limited to where my eyes are looking, hearing is omnidirectional. The world of sound surrounds and envelops me; it is in front of me and behind me, left and right, above and below. As theologian John Hull has written, sound is “a world which I cannot shut out, which goes on all around me, and which gets on with its own life. . . . Acoustic space is a world of revelation.”¹

Unfortunately, the world of sound has been largely neglected by our contemporary culture. We together live in what is called the modern age, which for us in the West means that we live on the other side of that intellectual and technological revolution known as the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was and remains a Western worldview that enthroned science and reason as the principal methods by which we know our world, a knowledge entailing a supposed unprecedented degree of certainty. However, for all of its commitment to objectivity, scholars have noted that the Western

1. John Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (London: SPCK, 1990), 61–64; as cited in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

obsession with empirical evidence *emphasizes the visual*, generating its own biases—what might be called “visualism.” Western thought reflects a deep ideological partiality toward vision as the “noblest sense,” the visual representing the most exact way of communicating knowledge.² The famous dictum of the eighteenth-century British philosopher John Locke summarizes well this bias: “The perception of the mind is most aptly explained by words relating to the sight.”³

When it comes to the fundamental and lasting questions of life . . . these are questions that cannot be answered by balance sheets, flowcharts, or user’s manuals; these are questions that can only be answered by listening, specifically listening to what God has said and continues to say.

With the advent of photography, advertising, television, and computer graphics, there has been a clear triumph of the visual in Western culture. There is today a subtle yet pronounced conceptual link established between image and reality, indicated by idioms such as “image is everything” and “seeing is believing,” or the importance of “eyewitness testimony” in the courtroom. In contrast, we never say “sound is everything” or “hearing is believing.”⁴

I am more and more convinced that this emphasis on the visual has had a profound effect on how we relate to the world, particularly with respect to our conception of *knowledge*: if we can *see* the

2. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 106.

3. Cited in Guy L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1.

4. And yet, as my colleague Bill Stutzman points out, we’ve never been more surrounded by sound; music constantly plays in our public spaces, through our earbuds, in our cars, etc. We actually are so accustomed to it that we have trained ourselves to tune it out and *not* hear. Always hearing, we don’t hear.

relationships between things, such as a flowchart, lab report, or user's manual, we believe that we can have a better understanding of things than if they were communicated through another medium, such as a song or poem. We live in a world where balance sheets, not Bach, reveal reality.

But this prejudice tends to eclipse another way of imagining our world and what it means to know within it. When it comes to the fundamental and lasting questions of life, such as what it means to be human, what it means to have purpose and significance, and what it means to exist, these are questions that cannot be answered by balance sheets, flowcharts, or user's manuals; these are questions that can only be answered by *listening*, specifically listening to what God has said and continues to say. Hence, in Greek, the word "to hear" (*akouein*) also means "to obey."

Perhaps you might be familiar with Walker Percy's parable "The Message in the Bottle." He wrote of a castaway with amnesia stranded on an island. As he assimilates with the natives of the island, he begins to realize that their scientific and analytical way of understanding the world cannot account for or answer the question of why he was on the island to begin with. In order for him to discover who he is, he must receive news from across the sea.

Percy's parable is about us. We find ourselves on this third rock from the sun, surrounded by a sea of cosmic space, and the only possible way that we can know why we are here and what life really means is if a voice from outside this cosmos breaks in and tells us. Science and technology can't help us here; we have to be open to another way of knowing, which comes only through listening.

3. FAITH COMES BY HEARING

I therefore find it fascinating that in our Christian tradition, we are designated by St. Paul as the *klētos* or “called ones,” who belong to the *ekklesia*, the Greek word for “church,” which is a combination of *ek*, meaning “out of,” and *kalein*, meaning “to call.” A call is something audible, something meant to be heard and received, not simply seen or read. The church is constituted by those who have been “called out of” or “called forth” from the world in order to gather together and witness to the breaking in of another world. In Romans 10:14-17, Paul asks, “How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? . . . Just as it is written, ‘HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!’ . . . So faith comes from *hearing*” (NASB, emphasis added).

And so there is present throughout the history of Christian thought a sense that the redemption of the cosmos in Christ is revealed and thereby known through music, the ways in which Christianity sounds.

It was within this sonic world that a distinctly Christian soundscape emerged. This Christocentric soundscape, empowered by the Holy Spirit, set the stage for what patristics scholar Carol Harrison has called “transformative listening.” Christian rhetoric, embodied in the sermon or homily, combined with sacred chant in order to awaken the imagination through sound, inspiring the listener not merely to hear but also to understand, to apprehend Scripture as it was combined with the Christ event. As such, the recitation of Scripture and song cultivated an aural map of the cosmos re-created in Christ for the auditor. In the midst of a largely illiterate populace, Christianized rhetoric and chant had the power to reshape the sonic appetites and expectations of the general population.

The Christian tradition is therefore a sonic tradition. For all of the ambiguities and episodic suspicions toward music that we find throughout church history, Ralph Martin is certainly correct in saying: “The Christian Church was born in song.”⁵ Indeed, in what can be considered the first extant text depicting the Roman government’s recognition of Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism, Pliny the Younger’s letter to the Emperor Trajan describes Christians in the early second century as those who assembled “on a set day before dawn and to sing a hymn among themselves to the Christ, as to a god.”⁶

And so there is present throughout the history of Christian thought a sense that the redemption of the cosmos in Christ is revealed and thereby known through *music*, the ways in which Christianity *sounds*. Thus, rediscovering music in our time involves in many respects rediscovering our world and the ways in which we know.

4. MUSIC AS AURAL SACRAMENT

There is a particularly apropos scene that exemplifies this conception of music in the 1997 Italian film *Life Is Beautiful* (*La vita è bella*). The story revolves around an enthusiastic and charismatic Jewish man named Guido Orefice living in Nazi-occupied Europe. We meet Guido as he falls in love with a beautiful young woman named Dora. Guido pours all his humor and enthusiasm into courting her, greeting her every day in the market square with the words, “Good day, princess!” They eventually marry and are soon gifted with a baby boy whom they name Joshua. Guido loves Joshua with all his heart and pours the same enthusiastic humor and joy into the life of his son.

5. Ralph P. Martin, “Aspects of Worship in the New Testament Church,” *Vox Evangelica II* (1963): 6–32.

6. For a further development of theology as essentially a *listening* act, see Bernd Wannensch, “‘Take Heed What Ye Hear’: Listening as a Moral, Transcendental and Sacramental Act,” *Journal for the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. S1 (2010): 91–102.

However, on the day of Joshua's fifth birthday, Guido's family is forced into a concentration camp. Guido and Joshua are both separated from Dora, as she is sequestered along with all the other women on the female side of the camp.

At one point in the movie, when Guido is assigned the duty of serving SS officers supper in the large house that overlooks the concentration camp, he gets a moment to himself and goes into a room that has a phonograph and records. He quickly sifts through the LPs and finds the song that he sang to Dora when he was courting her. He places the record on the turntable, points the shell-shaped speaker out the window, and the song proceeds to fill the evening sky. Dora hears the song from the other side of the camp. She stands and looks up; she realizes that Guido is still alive. At that very moment, as Guido gazes out of the window and she from far away looks up into the night sky, the echoes of music become for both of them what we might call an *aural sacrament*, a sonic bridge wherein they both become present in each other's lives.⁷ Music provided a means of grace by which their hearts embraced each other in shared love and indescribable joy, as if they were both caught up on the wings of angels and lifted into Paradise itself.

We too can once again experience the presence of God, from which we were originally alienated, restored through the sacrament of sound. We can still hear the echoes, gaze at the refracted beauty, smell the fragrance, and taste the food of Paradise, for it is through Christ that the beauty of our heavenly Paradise, our original and future home, has been reawakened in this world. Sacred sound sanctifies our hearing to remind us that the darkness of this age is no match for the splendor of the world yet to come. The melodies of redemption thus bridge together two Advents, two heralding choirs of angels, preparing us and our world for their cosmic transfiguration.

7. For a development of Franz Liszt's musical theology, see Paul Barnes, "Franz Liszt and the Sacramental Bridge: Music as Theology of Presence," <http://capress.link/coe0101>.

But to hear the eternity in these echoes, we're going to have to reorient ourselves not only to music, but also to the world itself. Such a reorientation begins with rediscovering the profound significance of sound for our human experience. We who are the "called ones," who receive "faith by hearing," are already somewhat privy to the significance of sound. However, few of us are fully aware of the manifold dimensionality of the acoustic world which, like my grandfather's garden, offers us a bouquet of audible fragrances and sonic delights that awaken our senses to a world unseen, an otherwise undisclosed reality, revealed to those with ears to hear. It is to that world that we now turn.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In what ways has music impacted your life?
2. Recall a moment when you heard a song for the first time in several years, only to remember people, places, and events you hadn't thought about for ages. What does that say about music and its capacity to communicate life experiences?
3. How have you noticed the "triumph of the visual" in our culture?
4. Do you think that our modern bias toward the visual has changed the way we perceive reality?
5. What would a "theology of listening" entail?

SUGGESTED LISTENING EXERCISES

Listen to the first movement, “Kyrie Eleison,” of J.S. Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*. As you listen, reflect on how the music reveals the world in which Bach lived. Can you hear attributes and characteristics of the ideals of his culture? What does his music say about the nature of Christian worship? The order of the universe? The purpose of art? The ideals of community?

Now compare and contrast that with a highly modern piece such as *Philomel* by Milton Babbitt. What does this piece reveal about the world that Babbitt inhabits, and how does it contrast with the world of Bach?

You can reveal to your students that these two composers come from the same (Western) culture, two hundred years removed. Given the stark contrast between both worlds, you can then ask: What happened to our culture? What changed?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Paul Barnes, “Franz Liszt and the Sacramental Bridge: Music as Theology of Presence,” <http://capress.link/eoe0101>.

Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

David Hoews, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

CHAPTER TWO

Soundscapes: Making Sonic Sense

1. INTRODUCTION

In our last chapter, I introduced the classical notion of music as an aural sacrament, a sonic bridge by which the presence of another is experienced sonically by the listener. I think it's safe to say that we've all experienced this in some way. Each of us has heard a song, perhaps for the first time in many years, and suddenly, almost out of nowhere, people, places, and events which were previously absent from our recollections come to mind, often in extraordinary detail. Our hearts are stirred by perceptions, emotions, and inclinations that we haven't felt in quite some time, all of which were roused by a mere melody or simple tune.

What's going on here? Why is music such a powerful mode by which to communicate our past experiences of people, places, and events?

Acoustic space is a world of revelation.

One answer is found in the nature of sound itself. To understand the myriad ways in which music serves as a mode of wider human experience, we need to better appreciate the significance of the sonic dimension of our lives. In this chapter, we'll discover the profound world of acoustic space, and the several ways in which soundscapes shape our experience of ourselves and of our world.

2. THE WORLD OF SOUND

I quoted previously the insight from theologian John Hull that sound is a world of revelation. I want to expand on that observation. Hull's book on his experience of going blind, *Touching the Rock*, provides for us a profound starting point of discovering how sound shapes our encounter with the world around us. Hull writes:

What is the world of sound? I have been spending some time outdoors trying to respond to the special nature of the acoustic world . . . the tangible world sets up only as many points of reality as can be touched by the body, and this seems to be restricted to one problem at a time. I can explore the splinters on the park bench with the tip of my finger but I cannot, at the same time, concentrate upon exploring the pebbles with my big toe. . . . The world revealed by sound is so different. . . . On Holy Saturday I sat in Cannon Hill Park while the children were playing. . . . The footsteps came from both sides. They met, mingled, separated again. From the next bench, there was the rustle of a newspaper and the murmur of conversation. . . . I heard the steady, deep roar of the traffic, the buses and the trucks. . . . [The acoustic world] stays the same whichever way I turn my head. This is not true of the perceptible [i.e., visually perceptible] world. It changes as I turn my head. New things come into view. The view looking that way is quite different from the view looking this way. It is not like that with sound. . . . This is a world which I cannot shut out, which goes on all around me, and which gets on with its own life. . . . Acoustic space is a world of revelation.¹

I find that Hull's analysis of acoustic space captures profoundly the uniqueness of sound for our human experience. Roger Scruton observes that sound is irreducibly abstract in that it's not attached

1. Hull, *Touching the Rock*, 61–64; as cited in Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 24–25.

as an attribute or quality of things, like color.² Sound in fact can be heard without knowing the source or the object producing the sound. By contrast, I can't experience the color green without experiencing the object to which such color is attributed. Similar to Hull, Jeremy Begbie expands on this observation by noting that while discrete objects can only be in one place at one time, sound can surround us and envelop us.³ My experience of the world through sight is inescapably *directional*: I can see only what is in front of me. However, my experience of sound is *omnidirectional*: I can hear all around me, above and below. Don Ihde observes: "I may hear all around me, or, as a field-shape, sound *surrounds* me in my embodied positionality."⁴ Moreover, while I can't see what is going on in the room next to the one that I occupy, I can hear its activities; sound increases exponentially my field of perception, which has fascinating applications to music that we shall develop in the chapters that follow.⁵

3. THE VISIBLE INVISIBLE AND THE HEARING BODY

There are two aspects of the above observations that I think crucial for understanding the nature of sound and its relation to our humanity.

First, *sound makes visible the invisible*. A fascinating dimension of sound is that it alerts us to that which we cannot account for in any particular object or thing. Even the frequencies that make up sound cannot themselves, at a phenomenological level, account for what

2. See Scruton's full discussion on the nature of sound in *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 1–18.

3. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 24.

4. Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 74.

5. "In short," Begbie (*Theology, Music and Time*, 24), notes, "there appears to be the attribute of 'omnipresence' in music."

sound actually is.⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy puts it this way: while I can hear what I see, I can never see what I hear.⁷ Here's an example I like to give to my students. Imagine sitting in a movie theater and watching an epic battle scene from Peter Jackson's depiction of the Tolkien trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. What kind of sounds would you be hearing? Certainly we would hear loud dramatic music, the clashing of steel swords, battle cries, and the like. Now imagine that something goes wrong with the sound system and the speakers go completely silent. The movie continues to play, but there is no sound. Has anything in any way changed visually? The answer of course is no; the *visual* aspect of the film experience goes on unaffected. What disappeared from our experience is a profound sonic dimension *that cannot be seen*; the soundtrack is, in a word, *invisible*. Thus, one of the mystical elements of sound is that it makes the invisible "visible" or sensed.

Secondly, *sound is "heard" by the whole body*. We encounter sounds not merely through our ears; rather, sound permeates our entire bodies. Ihde draws out the implications of hearing for our embodiment: "Phenomenologically I do not merely hear with my ears, I *hear* with my whole body. My ears are at best the *focal* organs of hearing. This may be detected quite dramatically in listening to loud rock music. The bass notes reverberate in my stomach, and even my feet 'hear' the sound of the auditory orgy."⁸ Here, I can't help but think of the unfortunate times I've stopped at a red light next to a low-riding car with a woofer the size of an army tank, blaring bass-heavy beats that rattle my car windows, not to mention the loose change in my cupholder. In fact, in a manner similar to the vibrating eardrum, this is why we dance; dance is simply one of the ways in which the whole body hears; in other words, a dancing body is a hearing body.

6. It's tempting to think here of the riddle as to whether a tree falling in the forest still makes a sound if there were no one to hear it.

7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 10.

8. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 45.

4. ENCOUNTERING THE WORLD OF SOUNDS

So, *what* in fact are we hearing? What are these sound waves and frequencies communicating to us and how do we make sense of them? How does acoustic space shape our perception of the world around us? In what follows, I list several ways in which sound shapes our human experience. Note that I offer here a representative rather than an exhaustive list; your classroom discussions may reveal many more!

a. Time

Our perception of time is often inextricably linked to sounds. Perhaps the most obvious example is the alarm or the tick per second from an analog clock or watch, or the church bells ringing on the hour. We can also hear time in terms of duration, like the extended and continuous sound of a fan blowing or a motor running. Morning can be identified with the sounds of birds tweeting, while evening is characterized by the chirping of crickets. Even the seasons can be heard. Nighttime in a spring forest finds a symphony of chitters and cheeps, while a winter evening is cool, calm, and still; the sounds of the beach suggest summer, and the crunch of leaves underfoot indicates fall. Even cultural celebrations of time can be heard, as is the case every December in the West. In short, “sound embodies the sense of time.”⁹

b. Space

Musicians are particularly sensitive to the sound of space. The sound check is usually the first thing musicians do when entering a concert venue, determining the quality of sound in the performance hall. The extent to which sound echoes as well as the nuances of timbre and tone indicate such features as the space’s size and shape. The materiality of ceilings, walls, and floors, made up of wood, plaster, glass, or stone, all affect in some way a space’s acoustic dimension-

9. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 84.

ality. We can also hear the difference between inside and outside, a small space and a large space, a pub and a daycare, an indoor pool and an outdoor pool. The space inside a car sounds different from the space in an auditorium.

c. Region

As we extend the concept of space, we encounter the acoustic dimensions of regions. Here we encounter distinct accents associated with different nations or cultures; often a person's home province or territory can be detected by their inflection of speech, such as in the American South. We can tell the difference audibly between urban regions, characterized by inflated activity and decibel, and rural regions. The Middle East is sonically distinguished by the sound of the *Adhan*, or call to prayer, echoing from towering minarets, while Japan is recognized by the plaintive plucking sounds of the koto.

d. Shapes, surfaces, and interiors

We might be surprised that, upon reflection, shapes have sounds. If I were to put a marble in a shoebox, the sound it would make as I tilt the box would be markedly different than the sound of a die or some other cube. The sound of a basketball or bowling ball rolling on a hard court is quite different from the sound made on the same surface by a skipping football or shuttlecock. The hard court itself evidences the fact that we can hear surfaces: the squeak of the basketball sneakers is remarkably different from the sound of tennis shoes on a clay court; the sound of high heels walking on wooden floors is rather different than on gravel. So too the creak of the wooden floor and the muffling of the rug. And even interiors exemplify sonic significance, such as when knocking on walls "looking" for a stud or stringer into which to drive a nail to hang a picture. And in terms of making the invisible visible, we often get the first sight of our new baby while inside the mother's womb through a technology termed *ultrasound*.

e. Directionality

We noted previously that sound is omnidirectional; it transcends the discrete specificity of visual encounters in the world around us. Along with this, sound is able to communicate proximity in its own unique way. Don Ihde cites the work of Georg von Békésy, who has shown that our sense of directionality is much more precise with sharp clicking sounds than with tones. This is perhaps why we intuitively snap our fingers, pound a desk, or speak more sharply when trying to get someone's attention.¹⁰ Moreover, most of us are aware of something called the Doppler effect, which involves either the increase or decrease of sound waves as they move closer to or farther from the perceiver. Faint sounds are intuitively sensed as distant and far away, whereas increasingly loud and obtrusive sounds are appropriated as approaching and immanent.

f. Size

Another dimension of sound perception involves size. Perhaps you remember the scene from the movie *Jurassic Park*, when the stranded tourist played by Jeff Goldblum hears the approaching footsteps of the massive tyrannosaurus rex, the low thud echoing throughout the shaking earth. The power of the scene is in what is merely heard and not seen: the colossal size of an approaching threat. Contrast this with the sound of a toddler's footsteps pattering across the family room floor. We can distinguish the size difference in children's and adults' steps and movements, and even from the depth and range of voice. We make sonic distinctions between an immense Mack truck and a midsize Honda Civic.

g. Emotion

It perhaps goes without saying that different emotions entail different sounds. Laughter, cheering, chuckling, and giggling are all

10. Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 75.

associated with happiness and enjoyment, while crying, groaning, and whimpering are associated with sorrow and disappointment. A scream can either be an indicator of fear or elation depending on its timbre and character. In sporting events, we can hear how the game is going based on the reactions of the fans: victory is signified by cheers reaching upward while defeat is accompanied by groans falling downward. And how many of us have been told: “It’s not what you said, but *how* you said it that concerns me.”

5. AUDITORY FIELDS AND THE NUMINOUS

The combination of these variegated sounds in our sonic experience of life creates what Ihde terms an “auditory field,” which involves the human brain’s perception of focal or foregrounded sounds and fringe or background sounds. The multidimensionality of sounds creates in effect a soundscape, an acoustic context in which I am sonically absorbed. The most distant sound available to the ear represents the frontier or border of the soundscape, followed by gradations of sonic proximity to the listener, all orchestrated coherently by the human mind.

The fact that such an auditory field is itself nondiscrete, revelatory of an invisible and intangible dimension of reality, has had a profound impact on the formation of our humanity. Most profoundly, soundscapes have contributed to the experience of the supernatural, or what the German theologian Rudolf Otto terms the “numinous”: the nondiscursive, ineffable experience of the holy or divine.¹¹ The numinous is “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures. . . . [The feeling expresses] the note

11. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 5–11.

of submergence into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind. . . . The numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self.”¹² According to Otto, the object of the numinous is expressed as *mysterium tremendum*, that which is “quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar,” characterized by “awefulness,” “overpoweringness,” and “energy,” the encounter of which evokes variegated and complex emotional reactions, ranging from the terrifying to the sublime.¹³

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direction and surface, size and shape,
reveal to us a world that transcends
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According to Otto, one of the primary means by which one encounters the numinous is through sound, both in terms of heard sounds as well as uttered sounds. He cites as an example the Hindu employment of the holy syllable *Om* (or *Aum*) as a meditation mantra. Noting its lack of semiotic or referential specificity, Otto writes: “It is really simply a sort of growl or groan, sounding up from within as the quasi-reflex expression of profound emotion in circumstances of a numinous-magical nature, and serving to relieve consciousness of a felt burden, almost physical in its constraining force.”¹⁴ Otto’s observations corroborate those of nineteenth-century musicologist Edmund Gurney:

The link between sound and the supernatural is profound and widespread. . . . Possibly sound—like the gods a powerful unseen presence—is an unacknowledged model for our concept of the other-

12. Otto, *Holy*, 10–11.

13. Otto, *Holy*, 12–26.

14. Otto, *Holy*, 197.

worldly. . . . Ritual sound makes the transcendent immanent.”¹⁵

6. SUMMARY

Our world is a deeply sonic world. The acoustic dimensions of space and time, direction and surface, size and shape, reveal to us a world that transcends our sight, one that surrounds us and yet in a very real way eludes us. But what of those sounds that transfigure into melody, harmony, and rhythm? What kind of sonic world does song reveal to us? As Scruton writes:

The sound world is inherently other, and other in an interesting way: it is not just that we do not belong in it; it is that we *could* not belong in it: it is metaphysically apart from us. And yet we have a complete view of it, and discover in it, through music, the very life that is ours. *There* lies the mystery, or part of it.¹⁶

It is to that mystery that we now turn.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the ways in which sounds are different from what we see?
2. What are some examples of sound making the invisible visible?
3. What are ways in which the whole body “hears”?
4. What are some ways in which we hear time?

15. Cited in Guy L. Beck, ed., *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 22–23.

16. Scruton, *Aesthetics*, 13–14.

5. Take a moment to listen to your immediate surroundings. What's the farthest sound you can hear? Can you hear sounds above and below you? Is there an arrangement of sounds in terms of proximity?
6. How do different spaces exemplify different sounds?
7. Can you guess where a person is from by how she or he speaks? In what ways?
8. Think of ways in which you can hear different emotions. What are the differences between a laugh of joy and a shriek of horror?

SUGGESTED LISTENING EXERCISE

In two to three pages, write about a sonic experience of your choice. This may involve sitting in an artificial environment (home, café, or coffeehouse) or in a natural environment (forest, hillside, beach). Record observations of the multitude of sounds around you and think through how the convergence of these sounds impacts the way you experience and perceive the world in terms of time, space, directionality, emotion, etc.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

