

Gerald C. Liu. *Music and the Generosity of God*. Radical Theologies and Philosophies Series. Michael Grimshaw, Michael Zbaraschuk, and Joshua Ramey, eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xiii, 140 pp. \$69.99. Hardcover. ISBN 9783319694924. \$54.99. Ebook. 9783319694931.

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This imaginative, sometimes dense, and consistently provocative work is a distillation of the author's 2013 PhD dissertation of the same title for the Department of Religion of Vanderbilt University. The thesis is that "all sounds instantiate the generosity of God." Intentionally authoring "out of a particular personal devotion," this classically trained musician, Methodist minister, and professor of worship and preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary contends that the entirety of the world's sounds heralds the giving of God. The author constructs his argument drawing broadly from twentieth-century avant garde music, visual arts, aesthetics, philosophy, theology, and multiple allied disciplines. Pivotal to the thesis is John Cage's 1952 composition 4'33", a work in which musicians are given no notes to play. The "music" fundamentally consists of environmental sounds the audience perceives during the performance. This was Cage's sonic manifesto shattering every barrier between "music" and "sound." Liu deploys this porous view of music to underscore that the soundscapes of everyday life witness "divine charity" accessible to all.

The work unfolds through seven compact chapters, each introduced by a brief abstract and list of keywords. Chapter 1 ("Introduction") introduces the thesis and four central voices that thread throughout the volume. Besides Cage, these are composer/conductor Pierre Boulez and theologians Jeremy Begbie and Jean-Luc Marion. It is Begbie's critique of Cage and more generally his theologizing about contemporary music that Liu is concerned to refute.

Chapter 2 ("A Silent Prayer") summarizes the theological dismissal of Cage's 4'33" and Liu's effort to "rehabilitate theological interest in the piece." This includes reflections on Cage's religious background and, more importantly, a 1948 symposium when Cage delivered the lecture "A Silent Prayer." Liu believes this is pivotal for understanding Cage's work theologically.

Chapter 3 ("Theological Stocktaking with Pierre Boulez") turns to the music of Cage's contemporary, Pierre Boulez. Equally maligned by theological commentators, Liu argues that Boulez's work is rich for theological harvesting. His most persuasive argument is that the young Boulez's creative quest for originality and organization should be reevaluated theologically as actually refracting attributes that Begbie posits of God.

Chapter 4 ("The Epistle of 4'33'") returns to a consideration of Cage's work, particularly through South and East Asian religions and philosophies that Cage explored. It also ponders the impact on Cage of White Paintings by artist Robert Rauschenberg. These divergent sources allowed Cage to posit compositional emptiness as rife with infinite possibilities.

Chapter 5 (“The Ubiquity of Music and Sacramental Life”) is the most theologically explicit chapter. Employing phenomenology, largely through Jean-Luc Marion, Liu refutes the “theological ventriloquy” of writers like Begbie, who employ music as a conduit for preconceived beliefs rather than a fundamental revelation that theology needs to excavate. A return to the paintings of Rauschenberg allows Liu to explicate how apparently “empty” art is a revelation of divine charity and an exercise of unbounded freedom, even “grace.”

Chapter 6 (“The Spook of Modern Technology and the Generosity of Music”) is an excursus on evolving technologies. Liu asserts that, despite its many critiques, modern technology does not lead to aesthetic deterioration. Rather, such reimaginings through radio, magnetic tapes, and sonocytology (amplifying inaudible vibrations from cellular life) are powerful prompts for advances in theological interpretation.

Chapter 7 (“Conclusion”) not only summarizes previous arguments but offers further frames for exploring the central thesis about sound instantiating the generosity of God. These include “theological modularity” in which the revelatory power of sound overwhelms logical and theological precision.

This is not a work for the faint of heart. The author’s polymathic approach is both exhilarating and occasionally frustrating. There are so many vectors explored and disciplines and frameworks deployed that the work seems more like a rhapsody than a symphony. Thoughtful editing could have eliminated unnecessarily opaque language that sometimes impedes the forward movement of the argument. The use of more Dilthian-psychologicistic approaches in exploring the religious backgrounds of Cage and Boulez was unconvincing given the broadly deconstructive approach of the author.

The main concern for this reviewer was that the work seems more developed philosophically than theologically. One example was the narrow approach to sacramentality (chapter 5). The author consistently emphasizes sound as gift and acoustic evidence of God’s generosity, not containable or controllable by human frameworks. Sacramentality, however, is God’s incarnate generosity that requires human engagement and response. How does a sacramental framework inform our understanding of a necessarily limited yet completely human response to divine charity? Furthermore, there is such optimism about grace and gift here that the dark side of the sonorous is very underdeveloped. Is the detonation of a suicide bomb and its consequent cries of anguish also revelatory of the generosity of God? Or are they acoustic testimony that the sacramental invitation sonically revealed has gone unheard?

There is much to delight, inform, and confront in this brisk and astute work. It is the most inventive piece on “music” and theology I have read in recent memory. I encourage the author to continue pushing such boundaries, boldly leading us in this unfolding sonic sacramentality.