Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2020, Vol 6, No 2, 67–90
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n2.a3
Online ISSN 2226-2385 | Print ISSN 0028-2006

Bonhoeffer on amusing ourselves to death: Mature aesthetic existence as antidote to everyday aestheticism

Adrian Coates
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa
coates.adrian@gmail.com

Abstract

In 1985, Neil Postman famously and presciently bemoaned a world "amusing itself to death." Ironically and significantly, it is amidst the atrocities of Nazism and the struggle against Hitler that from his prison cell Bonhoeffer reflects on a faithful Christian response to sensory immediacy, calling for the church to found Kierkegaard's notion of aesthetic existence anew. This, he suggests, should neither entail an embrace of aesthetic existence as absolute, nor the rejection of aesthetic existence in favour of ethico-religious existence. Rather, it should be the polyphonous celebration of Christological this-worldly reality, an affirmation of the penultimate in light of the ultimate. While Bonhoeffer's musical metaphors help to articulate Bonhoeffer's argument, they are more than illustrative mechanisms. If on the one hand, the metaphors capture the centrality of aesthetic existence in being Christian, on the other, the metaphors themselves implicitly point toward the question of the formative nature of aesthetic existence and whether Bonhoeffer's own musical experience shaped his theology.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Søren Kierkegaard, aesthetic existence, music, Christian formation

Introduction

In 1985, Neil Postman wrote his well-known book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, wherein he lamented the detrimental effect of entertainment media,

specifically television at the time, on human thinking and being. As his son, Andrew Postman succinctly explains,

> The central argument of *Amusing Ourselves* is simple: there were two landmark dystopian novels written by brilliant British cultural critics [both of whom were contemporaries of Bonhoeffer] – *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell – and we … had mistakenly feared and obsessed over the vision portrayed in the latter book (an information-censoring, movement-restricting, individuality-emaciating state) rather than the former (a technology-sedating, consumption-engorging, instant-gratifying bubble).[1]

Postman Senior argued that his society of the 1980's actualised Huxley's prophecy that "people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think." As he saw it, the true danger lay not in Orwell's concern that "we would become a captive culture," but rather with Huxley's fear that "we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy."[2] In Huxley's own reflections in *Brave New World Revisited* (a non-fiction work written in 1958, almost thirty years after *Brave New World*, and almost a decade after Orwell's *1984*), he suggested that the world seemed to be moving towards his vision more rapidly than he expected. Huxley's comparison of the two perspectives is summarised by Postman, "In *1984* … people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure."[3]

Building on Huxley's prognostic, Postman's prescient observations remain relevant today, amidst the plethora of social and entertainment media vying for our senses, and the addictions to amusement which they cultivate. Arguably, dealing with the fragmentation of life, amidst the cacophony of voices amplified by these media, has become one of the key challenges

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1 Andrew Postman, "My Dad Predicted Trump – in 1985," in Richard D. Heffner and Alexander B. Heffner (eds.), A Documentary History of the United States (New York: Signet Classics, 2018), 604.

2 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), vii.

3 Postman, viii.

in contemporary life. This theme of fragmentation, and the Christian response to it, forms the backdrop for the discussion that follows. Times of social upheaval exacerbate and further highlight the fragmented human condition, which otherwise is more likely to remain hidden from view and surreptitiously destructive amidst the sedated busyness of modern life. At the time of writing, the world is again experiencing the exacerbation of this fragmentation through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on political, economic, and social life. Huxley himself was writing in the wake of the First World War and Great Depression, which ushered in the modern literary themes of decline, loss, and fragmentation. Bonhoeffer too wrote and reflected on the fragmentary nature of his context amidst Nazism and the Second World War, as we shall see. Not only did Bonhoeffer and Huxley mutually experience the sense of fragmentation of their time, they also shared a love for music, both reaching for a common musical metaphor in an effort to respond to this fragmentation: Contrapuntal music and the related themes of fugue and polyphony, which we shall shortly explore. Huxley did this, most notably, through his 1928 novel *Point Counter Point*, which Bonhoeffer read while in Ettal, working on *Ethics*. Whether or not Huxley thereby influenced Bonhoeffer's later theological reflection on fragmentation, using these musical metaphors, cannot be known with certainty, but it does point to a common acknowledgement of the problem of fragmentation and the fitting nature of these metaphors in response.[4]

The desire to placate the experience of fragmentation is both a driving force behind aesthetic existence and also fuels it with potency. In essence, Postman, and Huxley before him, are probing an anthropological question, exploring the powerful role of a malformed aesthetic in human existence.[5]

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4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English [DBWE] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 304; Mevlüde Zengin, "From Contrapuntal Music to Polyphonic Novel: Aldous Huxley's Point Counter Point." *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2015): 155–91; Donald Watt, "The Fugal Construction of "Point Counter Point." *Studies in the Novel* 9, no. 4 (1977): 509–17.

5 *Brave New World* can be read through the lens of a Nietzschean aesthetic, as a struggle between Apollonian and Dionysian existence. See Kim Kirkpatrick, "The Birth of Tragedy and the Dionysian Principle in Brave New World," in David Garrett Izzo and Kim Kirkpatrick (eds.), *Huxley's Brave New World: Essays* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014).

The core issue is articulated by Kierkegaard's distinction between aesthetic existence and ethico-religious existence (which intrigued Huxley, significantly influencing his work, following his reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* in the same year of writing *Brave New World*).[6] If aesthetic existence becomes paramount, to the exclusion of ethico-religious existence, then that which is pleasurable to the senses, in other words, everyday aesthetics, becomes absolute in perceiving reality, in what I will refer to as everyday aestheticism.[7] As Postman points out, if our concern lies exclusively with battles on the ethico-religious front, we will fail to appreciate the significance of everyday aestheticism, defending against Orwellian insurgence rather than the subtler Huxleyan threat,

> An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us … But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? … What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?[8]

This is the question that I am putting to Bonhoeffer. What *is* the antidote? Does "taking arms against a sea of amusements" mean rejecting all sensory pleasure, while exclusively embracing ethico-religious existence? Bonhoeffer rejects such a dichotomy, but he also rejects everyday aestheticism – aesthetic existence as absolute – as incompatible with the Christian life. What role, then, does every day aesthetics play in becoming and being Christian? In a world of viral media, fake news and virtual realities, what can we learn from Bonhoeffer about the enjoyment of everyday aesthetics in the Christian life, or in Kierkegaard's terms, the role

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6 James Sexton, "Aldous Huxley's Three Plays," in C. C. Barfoot (ed.), *Aldous Huxley Between East and West* (New York: Brill Rodopi, 2001), 69.

7 The use of the term "aesthetic" in what follows leans toward a broader, classical understanding, pertaining to sensory immediacy rather than exclusively relating to beauty and the arts. In so doing, we will be following Kierkegaard's usage as Terry Eagleton describes it, "For [Kierkegaard], as for the originators of the discourse, aesthetics refers not in the first place to art but to the whole lived dimension of sensory experience, denoting a phenomenology of daily life before it comes to signify cultural production," Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 173.

8 Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 156.

of aesthetic existence in becoming Christian? I will argue that Bonhoeffer provides both an affirmation of everyday aesthetics and a guideline for integrating it well in the Christian life, as well as a question concerning its formative role, for further exploration. Firstly, he affirms that mature aesthetic existence is a core expression of being Christian, as a celebration of incarnational, this-worldly life in the penultimate. Further, he offers a guideline for engaging it well, using musical metaphors, most famously, polyphony, to argue that love of Christ is the *cantus firmus* which grounds mature aesthetic existence, while allowing it to flourish in the Christian life. Finally, he leaves us with the intriguing question of whether his musical metaphors are not themselves the result of his own mature aesthetic existence. In other words, it is worth asking whether Bonhoeffer's own everyday aesthetic enjoyment – his play – and specifically his enjoyment and playing of music may have had a formative impact on his theology, or ethico-religious existence.

Bonhoeffer's affirmation of aesthetic existence

Bonhoeffer engages the concept of aesthetic existence in a letter written from prison, on the 23rd of January 1944. The context here is particularly significant, considering his embrace of aesthetic existence in this passage; we need to remind ourselves that Bonhoeffer is writing as a prisoner, amidst the atrocities of Nazism, the war and the pressing ethical demands dominating the time,

> I wonder whether – it almost seems so today – it is only from the concept of the church that we can regain the understanding of the sphere of freedom (art, education [Bildung], friendship, play). *This means that "aesthetic existence" (Kierkegaard) is not to be banished from the church's sphere; rather, it is precisely within the church that it would be founded anew …* Who in our time could, for example, light-heartedly make music, nurture friendship, play, and be happy? Certainly not the "ethical" person [a reference to Kierkegaard's ethical stage of life], but only the Christian.9 [Italics added]

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John de Gruchy, DBWE 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 268.

Kierkegaard refers to aesthetic existence in relation to enjoying life, the "play of unending freedom," and sensory existence purely in the moment, and Bonhoeffer here appears to be suggesting that such immediacy should be taken up into Christian living.[10] A narrow reading of Kierkegaard (in which discipleship demands a rejection of immature aesthetic existence, supplanting it with the more mature life stages of ethical and consequently religious existence) is therefore at odds with Bonhoeffer's position here. Even though a more nuanced reading of Kierkegaard shows that he does indeed continue to embrace the aesthetic and poetic in ethico-religious existence, it is a qualified and limited affirmation of aesthetic existence in Christian living, wherein he appears particularly reticent to explicitly suggest that sensory immediacy can play a role in becoming Christian.[11]

Bonhoeffer, however, goes further than this nuanced Kierkegaardian reading; he is more positive about sensory immediacy in the life of faith. Firstly, for Bonhoeffer, everyday aesthetic existence is a valid, indeed necessary, expression of being Christian. Bonhoeffer's explicit theology suggests that aesthetic existence is a fitting celebration of Christological this-worldliness. But there is also a second, more subtle affirmation that Bonhoeffer makes: aesthetic existence is not merely a tangential and insignificant aspect of being human: it is paradigmatic for the process of becoming. There is an implicit affirmation in Bonhoeffer's life and work of the formational nature of aesthetic existence. A clue is here in this very quote above, where he connects aesthetic existence with not only the expected categories of play and art, but also with friendship and *Bildung*. While *Bildung* is simply translated as "education," connecting the term to aesthetic existence and the influence of Romanticism means, it is better understood as self-cultivation, in the sense used within German neoclassicism, which

10 DBWE 8: 268n.24.

11 While Kierkegaardian scholarship offers a variety of perspectives on the issue (Walsh and Jothen being two examples highlighting that his relationship to the aesthetic is complex and more positive than it may first appear), Kierkegaard clearly does have reservations about the role of aesthetic existence in ethico-religious life, rooted in his critique of the Romantic employment of the concept, as Pattison shows, for example. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Peder Jothen, *Kierkegaard, Aesthetics, and Selfhood : The Art of Subjectivity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014); George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (London: SCM, 1999).

focussed on *Bildung* "and the achievement of wholeness of the individual personality as the goal of life and art."[12] Sensory immediacy is thus here aligned with relational and formative poetic categories.[13]

Bonhoeffer's call for a recovery of aesthetic existence thus needs to be situated not only in the context of his broader explicit theology – particularly his this-worldly Christology – but also his own lifelong, implicit embrace of mature aesthetic existence. From a young age, as part of a family with significant social standing, Bonhoeffer was exposed to the arts. In particular, Bonhoeffer flourished as a musician, his father hoping that Bonhoeffer would choose the career path of concert pianist.[14] As John de Gruchy puts it, "Aesthetic existence was an essential part of [Bonhoeffer's] own education and cultural formation (*Bildung*)."[15] Eberhard Bethge remembers that even during the years of the Finkenwalde Seminary (which provided much of the impetus for the writing of *Discipleship*), Bonhoeffer loved playing games, and "nobody in Finkenwalde was more eager for plays and music than he."[16] The point is confirmed by Bonhoeffer's niece, Renate Bethge, noting that it "was so normal for us and for him, as we played music often, even games sometimes, that I did not see that there was much new like a 'turn to the aesthetic.'"[17] There is no doubt that during his time in prison Bonhoeffer explored the aesthetic more intentionally than before in his writing, however, there is no discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's lifelong appreciation of the aesthetic, but rather, towards the end of his life, explicit reflection and engagement with that which had hitherto been largely implicit.

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12 Walsh, *Living Poetically*, 31.

13 As with the broader use of the term "aesthetic," "poetic" is here used in relation to Kierkegaard's conception of poetic living, or *poiesis* and the creation of self as the Romantics used the term, thus relating to the imaginative and existentially formative task of divine-human co-creation.

14 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 25.

15 John De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 150.

16 Eberhard Bethge, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology." *The Alden-Tuthill Lectures, The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* LI, no. 2 (February 1961): 24.

17 *Christianity, Art and Transformation, 150n.59.*

Theologically, in essence, Bonhoeffer affirmed aesthetic existence because he argued for the Christological nature of reality. True discipleship, or following after Christ, demands participation in becoming fully human, as Christ became human, thus the impetus behind Bonhoeffer's encouragement to embrace "this-worldliness." The Christian life is not defined by religion, but rather a mature worldliness. It is only by participating with God in this-worldly, incarnational experiences, located within a particular time and a particular place that true faith is learned. "This is how one becomes a human being, a Christian."[18] The life of the world matters because there is simply no dichotomy between the reality of God and the reality of the world, which come together in the reality of Christ. Jesus Christ, as human, calls on Christians to take their this-worldly humanity seriously. In other words, Bonhoeffer argues that aesthetic existence – friendship, play, art, *Bildung* – has a role to play in the affirmation of human dignity. Importantly, this is not the ultimate, and should never be understood as such (this is precisely the fault in everyday aestheticism, making the penultimate the ultimate), but celebration of being fully human is an important task in the penultimate, as it paves the way for the ultimate. While we cannot control the ultimate (the justification of the sinner by grace alone), in the penultimate we can create "conditions of the heart, of life, and in the world" that either nurture a receptive environment for it, or impede it.[19]

Bonhoeffer is, of course, not endorsing this-worldliness unreservedly. It is a mature, disciplined sense of this-worldliness for which he is arguing: as he famously put it, not the "shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection."[20] It follows that this should therefore apply to aesthetic existence. Bonhoeffer is calling for a mature, disciplined aesthetic existence, as opposed to mere aestheticism. It is tempting to borrow a phrase from Calvin Seerveld and suggest

18 DBWE 8:486.

19 DBWE 6:162.

20 DBWE 8:485.

that "aesthetic obedience" is what Bonhoeffer is suggesting.[21] After all, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on obedience is grounded in a distinct sense of this-worldliness. This means that embodiment and the senses are an integral part of this obedience.[22] But this would be to misrepresent what Bonhoeffer is calling for in a recovery of aesthetic existence. It would be to impose Kierkegaard's ethical life-attitude of permissibility onto a category that should be more fully understood in terms of the relational interactions of becoming and being Christian. It is not the "necessitas" of obedience or divine command that drives Bonhoeffer's embrace of aesthetic existence, but the "necessitas" of freedom.[23] He specifically contrasts this realm of freedom with the realm of obedience. The latter is marked by the response to a command or mandate, while the former is an expression of human freedom, not engaged for a particular purpose, outcome, or utility, but for its own sake, purely for the gift of being in the moment.

Bonhoeffer's qualification of aesthetic existence is, therefore, rooted in his relational understanding of freedom. As he puts it, "[F]reedom is not a quality that can be uncovered; it is not a possession, something to hand, an object … instead it is a relation and nothing else … Being free means 'being-free-for-the-other', because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free."[24] If relationship provides the conceptual framework within which we should understand the realm of freedom, and consequently aesthetic existence, then it follows that a Christological basis of relationship should guide this understanding. The Christian life is a participation in Jesus's "being-for-others."[25] If everyday aestheticism is the end result of self-centred aesthetic existence, Bonhoeffer's relational paradigm suggests that mature aesthetic existence is guided by love. A kenotic approach to aesthetic existence may appear to be an oxymoron, but it is worth exploring whether a selfless approach to aesthetic experience is

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21 Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), 42ff.

22 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, DBWE 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 225–26, 232.

23 DBWE 8:268.

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, ed. John de Gruchy, DBWE 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 63.

25 DBWE 8:501.

not more likely to lead to wonder (and an accurate vision of reality), rather than the self-centred titillation of aestheticism (and an illusory perception of the real). In this sense, aesthetic existence is not only a celebration of being human, but it also plays a fundamental role in the revelation of reality. Bonhoeffer suggests that if love is the compass that orients action in the world, such action provides a new vision of reality, as he puts it, "love makes the disciple able to see."[26] Drawing from Bonhoeffer's musical metaphors, we could say that love of Christ is the *cantus firmus grounding the polyphony of mature aesthetic existence in Christological reality. To explore this more fully we need to turn to Bonhoeffer's engagement with music and the way in which this influenced his own personal and theological formation.*

Bonhoeffer's elucidatory engagement with music

Kierkegaard described music as the archetypal aesthetic experience of sensory immediacy.[27] As such, Bonhoeffer's love for music is helpful to explore, both because he uses it to clarify his argument for the place of everyday aesthetics in the Christian life, but also because it reveals interaction between his own aesthetic and ethico-religious existence. Based on his musical experience, Bonhoeffer draws on musical metaphors to elucidate his embrace of mature aesthetic existence. Not only are these metaphors insightful, but further they pose the question of whether the realm of free play, and being in the moment musically, actually contributed to the development of his explicit theology. The suggestion here is that the metaphors which Bonhoeffer employs may not be merely the consequence of theological reflection on aesthetic existence (music, here), but that his

26 DBWE 4:140.

27 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I*, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong, vol. 3, Kierkegaard's Writings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 56–57. Huxley argues that it is precisely the nature of music as archetypal sensory immediacy which makes it valuable in human existence, "From pure sensation to the intuition of beauty, from pleasure and pain to love and the mystical ecstasy and death — all the things that are fundamental, all the things that, to the human spirit, are most profoundly significant, can only be experienced, not expressed … After silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music." Aldous Huxley, *Music at Night and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 19.

theology may be, at least partially, the consequence of formative paradigms created through his musical experience.

Bonhoeffer's personal embrace of music

As already mentioned, Bonhoeffer was a proficient musician. Music was a constant presence in the Bonhoeffer home throughout his formative years and this musically saturated existence continued throughout his life, with references to music appearing regularly in his work. His time in Harlem expanded his musical appreciation and Bethge notes that at Finkenwalde, the "two Bechstein grand pianos … were in constant use," while Bonhoeffer's extensive "collection of gramophone records, remarkable for those days, was at everyone's disposal," often playing the little-known spirituals.[28] The designation of a "music room" in itself is significant, since the underground seminary at Finkenwalde represents Bonhoeffer's practical template of what discipleship looks like as "life together." In Bonhoeffer's 1936 report, he writes, "Now as before, we spend a great deal of time and derive great joy from our music making … in general, I can hardly imagine our life together here without our daily music making. We have driven out many an evil spirit in this way."[29] Both the Bechstein piano, as well as the gramophone collection had also previously travelled with him to England, for his time there as a parish minister. His rooms, there too, were bustling with musical activity, "playing trios and quartets" or listening to music.[30]

Even in prison, deprived of these instruments and recordings, music continued to pervade Bonhoeffer's existence. His letters are scattered with musical notation as he imaginatively re-experienced these pieces "inwardly." Hearing music "from within," he said, gave him "an existential appreciation of Beethoven's music from when he was deaf," and helped him to more clearly attune himself to the beauty of a piece.[31] Here, due to the context (prison), and the informal nature of his explicit reflection

28 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 427.

29 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*, ed. H. Gaylon Barker, DBWE 14 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 278–79.

30 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 328.

31 DBWE 8:332.

(his letters), we are offered a unique window on the interplay between Bonhoeffer's "inward" aesthetic experience and that which becomes explicitly expressed in his theological reflection. We do well to remember, however, that even as Bonhoeffer begins to think about music and aesthetic existence explicitly, in theological terms, it is a reflection built on a lifetime of implicit existential embrace.

Bonhoeffer's explicit reflection on music produces a handful of overlapping musical metaphors, which he uses theologically in his prison letters, notably fugue, *Grundton*, polyphony and the related notions of *cantus firmus and counterpoint*.

Fugue: a Christological response to fragmentation

As previously noted, Huxley, Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer all comment on the fragmentary nature of existence. For Kierkegaard, Romantic existential aesthetics merely accentuates the fragmentary nature of life by locating the self in discreet and disconnected sensory moments. Kierkegaard suggests that the Romantic desire to "be one thing" is ultimately only to be actualised in Christ, as manifestation of both the finite and infinite.[32] For Bonhoeffer (similarly to Huxley), it is particularly the context of war – and the intensification of human finitude, mortality and brokenness which war brings – that provokes his concern. In a reflection, which mirrors Kierkegaard's observation of the radical vacillation of Romantic "moods," Bonhoeffer laments the behaviour of his fellow prisoners in a letter to Bethge, noting that, "When bombers come, they are nothing but fear itself; when there's something good to eat, nothing but greed itself … They are missing out on the fullness of life and on the wholeness of their own existence. Everything … disintegrates into fragments."[33] In a sense, Bonhoeffer is here describing everyday aestheticism, the devolution of life into the absolutisation of sensory immediacy, along with the concomitant

32 Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); George Connell, *To Be One Thing: Personal Unity in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life: Between Romanticism and Modernism: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

33 DBWE 8:405. The fragmentation that Bonhoeffer laments relates also to the impact of war on personal and professional lives, as well as the rise of the modern, siloed "specialist" in intellectual life; DBWE 8:305.

fragmentation that ensues. The timeless nature of this observation should be immediately apparent. While the nature of the "bombers" may change (a global pandemic, for instance), and the allure of "something good to eat" take different forms (something good to listen to, watch, touch, etc. – whatever may be pleasing to the senses in the moment), the vacillation of "moods" are marks of the fragmentation wrought by everyday aestheticism (a reality further exacerbated by contemporary consumerism and the amplified broadcast of these existential moods via social media).

Bonhoeffer turns to the musical concept of fugue, and in particular Bach's *Art of Fugue*, in an attempt to capture the theological assertion that the fragmentary nature of human finitude only has meaning within the larger divine composition of life.[34] It is not only that a fugue, which weaves multiple voices into a musical tapestry, is a metaphor which captures this integration well, but this is particularly so in the famed fugues of Bach, and here, significantly, the *Art of Fugue*, which remained unfinished at the time of Bach's death, and therefore, fragmentary. In contrast to those overcome by the fragmented immediacy of fear, greed, or desperation amidst the bombing raids Bonhoeffer observed above, he goes on in that letter to assert that, "Christianity, on the other hand, puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; in a way we accommodate God and the whole world within us."[35] To try to capture what he means by this, he refers to another musical metaphor, describing it as multidimensional polyphony.

Polyphony: a mature response to aesthetic existence

Bonhoeffer introduces his well-known metaphor of polyphony in a letter concerning the rightful place of erotic love. Amidst his own loneliness in prison, and in response to Eberhard Bethge's longing and love for his wife Renate (particularly when separated due to military service), Bonhoeffer considers the right orientation of these worldly desires. For Bonhoeffer, being founded in love of Christ distinguishes mature aesthetic existence from romantic aestheticism. This proposal is best explained through his framing of Christian living as polyphony (the coherence of multiple independent melodies in a single, textured composition).

34 DBWE 8:306.

35 DBWE 8:405.

Mature aesthetic existence, marked by a commitment to loving relationships (with creation, God and humankind), could be described as a polyphonous celebration of Christological reality. There is perhaps no more powerful aesthetic experience than sensual love. As Bonhoeffer considers how to respond well to earthly, erotic love, he describes the polyphony of life, anchored in the *cantus firmus* (the base melody in a polyphonic composition) of love for God.

> What I mean is that God, the Eternal, wants to be loved with our whole heart, not to the detriment of earthly love or to diminish it, but as a sort of cantus firmus to which the other voices of life resound in counterpoint … Where the cantus firmus is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants.[36]

"God, the Eternal" is the *cantus firmus*, and love of God does not negate, or obliterate the earthly sensory-erotic (to use a term from Kierkegaard). God-given, earthly aesthetic existence does not need to be controlled by the "necessitas" of obedience (Kierkegaard's ethical sphere of permissibility) but can freely flourish "as mightily as it wants" in counterpoint to the *cantus firmus* of love of God. Bonhoeffer reads these two – the divine *cantus firmus* and the earthly counterpoint – as reflecting the "undivided and yet distinct" nature of Christ.[37] As he puts it, polyphony is the "musical image of this Christological fact."[38]

For Bonhoeffer then, a mature approach to aesthetic existence would be one anchored, first and foremost, in love for God, as the *cantus firmus*, which would enable celebration of the realm of freedom, within the bounds of harmony and resonance. Such an exploration of aesthetic existence could be described as an embrace of all that is good and human in the penultimate, preparing the way for the ultimate.

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36 DBWE 8:394.

37 Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 209.

38 DBWE 8:394.

Grundton: aesthetic existence as paradigm-forming

While the *Art of Fugue* and polyphony elucidate Bonhoeffer's argument for this-worldly Christian existence, a third musical metaphor, the German term *Grundton*, speaks to the paradigmatic nature of these metaphors. In other words, up until this point we have been considering the illustrative value of these metaphors; helpful linguistic tools to clarify the argument. However, while this is valid, the question we need to engage at this point is whether these metaphors function solely as ornamental tropes – useful for painting a vivid mental picture, but not fundamentally a necessary aspect of the argument – or whether these musical experiences shaped Bonhoeffer's imagination, being paradigmatically formative, and thereby contributing to his perception of reality.

In a letter to Eberhard and Renate Bethge, Bonhoeffer offers thoughts for the day of the baptism of their son (his godson, who, intriguingly, would go on to become a professional musician). Amidst his reflections, prayers and blessings, Bonhoeffer affirms that, "Music, as your parents understand and practice it, will bring you back from confusion to your clearest and purest self and perceptions, and from cares and sorrows to the *Grundton* [translated 'underlying note'] of joy."[39] There are three observations we can make here: Firstly, Bonhoeffer ties music to self-formation and perception. The suggestion here is that music in and of itself, as archetypal sensory immediacy, has the ability to influence the way we see reality and our sense of self therein. Secondly, Bonhoeffer carefully qualifies that it is specifically music, "as your parents understand and practice it," which offers this positive influence. This appears to be an allusion, once again, to the fact that it is *mature* aesthetic existence that offers a positive formative influence, as a celebration of aesthetic this-worldliness in polyphonous counterpoint to the divine *cantus firmus*. Thirdly, Bonhoeffer refers to the musical metaphor of a "*Grundton*" of joy. Translated as "the underlying note," it refers to the English "tonic" or "key note" ("the 'first degree of a major or minor scale' or 'the main note of a key … after which a key is

39 DBWE 8:385.

named'").[40] While this metaphor resonates with Bonhoeffer's description of the cantus firmus in polyphony, the significant point to note here is that the existential "*Grundton* of joy" is experienced by way of music itself.

Bonhoeffer's use of *Grundton*, therefore, points to the fact that he is not merely using these musical metaphors as illustrative cognitive concepts, distinct from sensory experience, but that there is a symbiotic relationship between aesthetic experience and conceptualisation. An allusion to this can be seen as he attempts to draw from these living metaphors in order to capture implicit truth, and his consequent struggle to capture their meaning in the abstraction of language. Both here in this letter (he says "It hasn't turned out the way it should have")[41] and in the polyphony letter (where he says, "Do you understand what I mean?" and "I don't know whether I have said this clearly"),[42] he appears to be drawing on these metaphors in an effort to express a lived truth that lies beyond the limitations of language.

Did music have a formative impact on Bonhoeffer's theology?

As Andreas Pangritz shows, Bonhoeffer's musical experience and reflection while in prison occurs very much in tandem with his theological thinking in this period.[43] The chronology here is particularly worth noting: most of Bonhoeffer's allusions to music in his letters precede his pivotal theological question of what Christianity really is, "or who is Christ actually for us today?" penned on 30 April, 1944.[44] In other words, Bonhoeffer's musical reflections begin prior to what Bethge describes as Bonhoeffer's "new theology."[45] The intriguing question is whether they contributed to this

40 Robert O. Smith, "Bonhoeffer and Musical Metaphor." *Word and World* 26, no. 2 (2006): 199.

41 DBWE 8:382.

42 DBWE 8:395.

43 Andreas Pangritz, *The Polyphony of Life: Bonhoeffer's Theology of Music*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and John Morris, trans. Robert Steiner (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019).

44 Andreas Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint - Resistance and Submission: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Theology and Music in Times of War and Social Crisis," in Ralf K. Wustenberg and Lyn Holness (eds.), *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities, and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 29; DBWE 8:362.

45 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 853–92.

theological development, and thus whether his mature aesthetic existence played a formative role in his perspective of reality.

Although there are a number of musical references in Bonhoeffer's letters prior to 30 April 1944, three in particular are worth noting for our purposes here. We have already discussed one, Bonhoeffer's reflection on Bach's *Art of Fugue*, in a letter on 23 February 1944. Here Bonhoeffer for the first time introduces his thoughts on the multidimensionality of life, as reflected in contrapuntal music, which he would later expand upon as the polyphony of life, amidst his "new theology." The two other references are significant because in both of them Bonhoeffer offers us a window onto his existential processing of the music, as he experiences it "inwardly," physically writing out the musical notation in these letters. On 27 March 1944, Bonhoeffer describes his "listening" to Beethoven's opus 111 with his "inner ear," and being existentially struck by how beautiful and pure the experience was, "all the dross falls away, and it seems to take on a 'new body.'"[46] It is an existential experience clearly intertwined with (perhaps even catalytic for) his reflections on Easter, and the importance of living in light of the resurrection, as the letter goes on to explore.

However, the first reference, in a letter from December 1943, is perhaps most interesting, both because it is the earliest, and also because we have here the clearest depiction of the connection between his existential experience of music and his consequent theological reflection. Bonhoeffer writes to Bethge reflecting on a composition by Heinrich Schütz, the Augustinian "O bone Jesu."[47] In particular, he imaginatively re-experiences the music of the line, "o how my soul longs for you," writing out the musical notation of the seven notes for the singing of the "o." This is significant, because, as Pangritz explains, in the context of a hymn "colored by erotic associations … In Schütz's setting the melismatic figure on 'o' is repeated four times, each time a fifth higher … so that the musical expression is intensified in an extraordinary measure. … by means of transposed repetition of the melismatic motif, the 'ecstatic cry of longing' forms the 'center and climax' of the composition."[48] Bonhoeffer then comments, "Doesn't this passage in

46 DBWE 8:332.

47 DBWE 8:30–31.

48 Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint," 32.

its ecstatic longing combined with pure devotion, suggest the restoration of all earthly desire?"[49] Here, Bonhoeffer's sensory-erotic experience of music appears to be informing his theology, perhaps contributing to his later, more explicit reflections on Christological this-worldliness – thereby enhancing a Christological trajectory that would ultimately lead Bonhoeffer to affirm that "genuine transcendence" is a new life in "'being there for others,' through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbour within reach in any given situation. God in human form!"[50]

Further, taken together, these three musical references offer theological cohesion, suggestive of Bonhoeffer's broader conceptual perspective. Bonhoeffer's Beethoven-inspired Easter reflections on "the new body" dovetail with his response to fragmentation through the *Art of Fugue* and ultimate Christological hope, driven by his longing for the "restoration" of earthly desire through his existential experience of Schütz's composition. In short, as Pangritz notes, collectively these reflections suggest Bonhoeffer's eschatology in musical terms.[51]

The question this poses is, therefore, whether Bonhoeffer's embrace of mature aesthetic existence is not only a consequence of his this-worldly Christology (which it is), but whether his Christological this-worldliness is also informed by his mature aesthetic existence?[52] His experience of music, and his consequent reflection on music while in prison, at the very least, had an organically symbiotic relationship with his theological development, but may well also have provided categories of thought which

49 Pangritz's own translation; "Point and Counterpoint," 33.

50 DBWE 8:501. Consequently, Bonhoeffer's this-worldly aesthetics, as his embrace of mature aesthetic existence, proves distinctive from a theological aesthetics that harnesses the aesthetic as a means of engaging the (other-worldly) transcendent.

51 Pangritz, *The Polyphony of Life*, 51.

52 Schleiermacher affirms this fundamentally formational aspect of aesthetic existence when he states that, "Music is one great whole; it is a special, self-contained revelation of the world." He argues that even though a multitude of cultural and individual musical expressions are possible, great music is akin to a religious a priori, moving musicians and hearers beyond the particular, beyond the systems of music (or religion), toward a common essential reality. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 51.

he would not otherwise have had access to.[53] Jeremy Begbie suggests that it is "conceptuality arising from music [which] enables him to elucidate critical fields of doctrine."[54] It is a conceptuality that does not draw from music as an illustrative tool, but music is the very constitutive means through which the concepts are formed. Bonhoeffer is not drawing on music, he is thinking musically. As Begbie puts it, "Bonhoeffer's musical experience, specifically his aural experience of simultaneously sounding and mutually resonating tones … extended in time and woven around a cantus firmus … is 'made available' to the theological conceptuality and language concerned with the multidimensionality of the Christian life."[55] Begbie is here rejecting the understanding of concepts as "isolated mental units" that provide a bridge between words and "things-in-the-world."[56] Rather than three discreet elements – words, concepts and things-in-the-world – Begbie draws on Kathleen Callow in describing concepts as "'habitual events', habits of thought that order human experience in various configurations. Concepts are 'thought-in-action'. We do not attend thoughtfully *to* them; we attend *with* them, by means of them." An example clarifies the point: The concept of "vacation" draws from "a huge variety of direct sensory experiences of holidays, as well as a complex of associations garnered from elsewhere – sun, time to read, family reunions, and so on … The concept is not a mental picture of a tidily bounded object but pertains to the world-as-experienced …"[57] With Begbie, we can conclude that there is "every reason to believe" that this paradigmatic conceptual formation is happening through our sensory experience of music.[58] Consequently, if this holds true, it would be erroneous to merely limit theological formation to the realm of mental units, but, as with the entirety of ethico-religious existence, theological development would be inseparable from embodied life, including our everyday aesthetic experiences.

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53 De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation*, 145.

54 Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God*, 208.

55 *Music, Modernity, and God, 210.*

56 *Music, Modernity, and God*, 206.

57 *Music, Modernity, and God*, 206.

58 *Music, Modernity, and God*, 207.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's engagement with music and the metaphors that ensue elucidate two points regarding aesthetic existence. Firstly, the metaphors themselves, particularly polyphony, articulate a helpful model for distinguishing between self-centred, everyday aestheticism (an impediment to discipleship) and mature aesthetic existence (as integral to becoming Christian). Mature aesthetic existence operates in the realm of free play, not in the Kierkegaardian sphere of ethical obedience. Sensory immediacy only becomes problematic when it is pursued as a means to the absolute, rejecting the *cantus firmus*. Whether such absolute aesthetic existence is approached through the aestheticism of immediacy – via Postman's amusement-unto-death and the romantic immediacy of Kierkegaard's Don Juan – or through the sophisticated, reflective mode of Kierkegaard's Seducer, or Nietzsche's Dionysian movement "beyond good and evil" for that matter, the common deficiency here is the attempt to turn fragmentary finitude into the infinite absolute. However, the fragmentary nature of human finitude is not to be rejected in being Christian, but embraced, as it offers grounding bounds and limits to mature aesthetic existence amidst the restlessness for the ultimate, which drives powerful aesthetic expression. Within the frame of this Christological polyphony, aesthetic existence can, and should, freely flourish in the Christian life.

Secondly, Bonhoeffer's musical metaphors are not merely illustrative, but his very aesthetic experience of music may well have played a formative role in his theological conceptualisation. If conceptualisation is organically and symbiotically in relation to sensory experience in the world, then not only is mature aesthetic existence a polyphonous celebration of Christological this-worldliness, but it nurtures paradigms for perceiving such reality.

Bonhoeffer then leaves us with both a theological affirmation of everyday aesthetic existence, grounded in his Christology, as well as questions we need to further explore around the relationship of aesthetics, ethics, and faith. What relationship does aesthetic existence have to the shaping of the imagination, and consequently the way we see reality, even when these aesthetic experiences are not engaged for utilitarian purposes? Do every day aesthetic experiences – celebrations of the realm of freedom such as play, friendship, music, entertainment media, etc. – affect the way we see the

world, and consequently how we act in it? If they do, then everyday aesthetic existence is not only something to be celebrated in the penultimate as an expression of goodness in fully-human, this-worldly existence; it is also fundamental to meaning and action, ethics, and faith. Postman bemoaned the thinning of our humanity, as we allow the sensory immediacy of entertainment media to numb our intentionality and consciousness; but perhaps the real amusement unto death is that in such a state, not only is the *cantus firmus* completely lost, but the formative nature of aesthetic existence cultivates a paradigmatic sense of virtuality, supplanting the real.

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