

**The Music of the Spheres:  
Music and the Divine Life in George Steiner and Robert W. Jenson,  
Part One: Orientations**

[Part Two: Intersections will appear in the next issue of *Crucible*]

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**Abstract**

*This essay explores the commanding heights of George Steiner's and Robert Jenson's thinking about music and God. Despite their far-reaching differences, both thinkers bring the phenomenon of music into close descriptive proximity to the divine life. For Steiner, music witnesses to the undeniable presence of the divine, ever pressing upon us through artistic creation. Yet the divine life itself remains finally inaccessible to us, beyond human discourse and intelligibility. In Jenson, we overhear the life of God as a 'great fugue,' the divine music that is none other than the living discourse of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the identities named in Holy Scripture. But, for all their differences, Steiner and Jenson share more than what one might suppose at first glance. In this essay I demonstrate that, in spite of their irreconcilable differences, Steiner and Jenson exhibit remarkable similarities in their treatments of the temporality, ontology and freedom of music. In revealing these similarities within a greater difference I hope to show that Steiner's analysis of music can be appropriated to lend a descriptive thickness to Jenson's systematic musings on the temporal and ontological richness of the divine life as it happens between Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our creaturely participation within that divine harmony. Further, I aim to reveal how, through his analysis of the nature of music, Steiner effectively overhears something essential to the Christian understanding of God as triune, in a way at odds with his own agnostic tendencies to misplace the life of God or mis-identify a mute or solitary God behind the temporally and ontologically diffuse phenomenon he describes as the life of music. The point of the essay is not to use the musical experience as a 'proof' of God's existence or as a prolegomena to faith. Rather, in large measure, a more modest ambition motivates the essay: to continue the missionary task of the church within earshot of a theologically pagan and musically literate audience.*

**Introduction**

This paper explores the commanding heights of George Steiner's and Robert Jenson's thinking about music and God. Despite their far-reaching differences, both thinkers bring the phenomenon of music into close descriptive proximity to the divine life. For Steiner, music witnesses to the undeniable presence of the divine, ever pressing upon us through artistic

creation. Yet the divine itself remains finally inaccessible to us, beyond human discourse and intelligibility. In Jenson, we overhear the life of God as a 'great fugue.' Yet this divine music is none other than the living discourse of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the identities named in Holy Scripture. But, for all their differences, Steiner and Jenson share more than what one might suppose at first glance.

In this essay I demonstrate that, in spite of their irreconcilable differences, Steiner and Jenson manifest remarkable similarities in their treatments of the multi-dimensional temporality, ontology and freedom of music as it stands in relation to creation and creaturely existence. In revealing these similarities within a greater difference I hope to show that Steiner's evocative analysis of music can lend an aurally descriptive thickness to Jenson's systematic musings on God's life as a great fugue and creaturely participation within the divine harmony. Perhaps, through Steiner, Jenson's understanding of the divine music can be made even more musical. With rare exceptions, few theologians have attempted to take seriously Jenson's musings on music and theology seriously.<sup>1</sup> Jenson has referred to Christ as the great Experiment;<sup>2</sup> in what follows I experiment with Jenson. Further, I aim to reveal how, through his analysis of the nature of music, Steiner effectively overhears something essential to the Christian understanding of God as triune, and in a way at odds with his own explicit agnosticism.

The division of labour regarding my analyses is as follows: in Part One of this essay ('Orientations'), I briefly set forth an overview of how Steiner conceives of the divine presence lodged in artistic creations. I analyse the place of music in particular in some detail, insofar as music functions uniquely as the 'analogue' to the divine presence, by placing us in an immediate relation to the dialogue between being and nothingness in a manner that outstrips mere words. In this temporally-differentiated relation, we are encountered by the original fiat of creation, the ongoing 'music of the spheres' that continues to spill over into the present, and discover that human beings are 'ontically' fitted for that sense of transcendence conveyed by music. I then introduce Robert Jenson's 'fugued' Trinitarian theology, in which I delineate Jenson's attempt to redefine the eternity of the triune God as temporal infinity and shift the categories of knowing God's life from vision/substance to speaking/hearing/music. The expanding infinity of a fugue, in which we are invited to participate, is the most appropriate way of thinking about what kind of being God is. It will become clear, however, that Jenson's thinking about participating in the divine fugue is poles apart from Steiner's disjunction between his exploration of the phenomenon of music and his default doctrine of a solipsistic God.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Grenz was a happy exception. Stanley J. Grenz, 'The Divine Fugue: Robert Jenson's Renewed Trinitarianism,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30:2 (July 2003), 211-216. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 112-116.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Jenson, 'Christ as Culture 2: Christ as Art,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6:1 (January 2004), 74.

But that is not the end of the matter. In Part Two of this essay ('Intersections'), I pursue how, even given Steiner and Jenson's differences, the former's insights into the relation between music and silence, futurity and physicality are nevertheless analytically fecund when set in relation to the latter's exposition of the energies of Father, Spirit and Son, as those energies open created time within God's eternity and envelope us within the capacious fugue of God's life. I do not set out to prove anything like a rapprochement between Steiner and Jenson (that would be quite impossible), only that Steiner has overheard something in the life of music that can help us appreciate the movement of the triune life (implications that he would resist) and that by appropriating his thought we continue the missionary task within earshot of a theologically pagan and musically literate audience.

### Steiner's Aesthetical Metaphysics

For Steiner, an agnostic Jew, the notion of God as an active subject who reveals and authorises specific divine names is unbelievable. The common images we have of God descend not from God's self-revelation but seep from the recesses of the human psyche. However metaphysically cunning our conceptions of deity may be, they, and the grammars from which they emerge, remain 'ineluctably anthropomorphic.'<sup>3</sup> In language we traverse the realm of the human.

But Steiner's estimation of positive religion in general, and of Judaism and Christianity in particular, results not merely from a critique of language. It emerges blackened from the crematoria of Auschwitz and Dachau, the horror of which can be frequently felt in Steiner's essays. No 'coming to terms' avails itself to either religion with reference to the Shoah. Christianity, Steiner conjectures, remains 'sick at heart' over how its doctrine could generate centuries of anti-Semitism.<sup>4</sup> And the Jews themselves have not queried sufficiently how Christianity could have originated from the heart of Judaism.<sup>5</sup> No possibility of theological reconciliation survives between Jew and Christian. Theology, in this sense, has failed.<sup>6</sup>

Yet within Steiner's fierce critique of our theological idolatries he salvages a kind of theological minimum: the confession of God as 'the totally Other,' a confession commensurate with the radical testimony of God in Exodus 3.<sup>7</sup> The 'great tautology' expresses 'the in-gathering

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997), 185. See also Steiner, *My Unwritten Books* (New York: New Directions, 2008), 202ff.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, 'Through That Glass Darkly,' in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1976-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 344.

<sup>5</sup> Steiner, 'Through That Glass Darkly,' 345.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner, 'Through That Glass Darkly,' Even Moltmann's sensitive 'philo-Semitism' is deemed insufficient.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 185.

of all existence into a 'oneness' of strictly inconceivable compaction, *and* a zero point.<sup>8</sup> If a Word perdures beyond human words, that Word remains unavailable to our linguistic capacity.

In this discussion, Steiner follows the philosophical markers set by the most arduous of thinkers deep in the metaphysical wilderness: Eckhardt, Schelling, Heidegger. Contemplating Celan's indwelling of the Burning Bush of the death camps, Steiner ponders the austerity of divine solitude:

To what degree is the divine self-identification and identification to Moses *also* a closure, a banishment of men and women from the inviolate self-sufficiency of the creator? Is there a commitment here to continued meetings with man or a valediction, a withdrawal into an order of totality past all human understanding. Attempting... to experience, to 'undergo' this speech-act in Exodus, I have wondered whether we ought not to hear in God's statement the muffled echo of an infinite solitude, whether the grammar of mirroring in the tautology is not the figuration of an aloneness from which creation, and most sombrely that of man, is excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Attempting to philosophically 'prove' that this God exists or does not exist is a bootless enterprise.<sup>10</sup>

In *Errata*, Steiner himself voices the objection that waits. 'In that case... what difference does it make? If the totally 'Other' is inaccessible to human reason or imagination... why bother?'<sup>11</sup> - a fair question, to be sure. Steiner pursues this line of inquiry because he cannot escape the undeniable 'pressure of presence extraterritorial to explanation (music being the everyday, yet unfathomable, analogue to this pressure of presence).'<sup>12</sup> But how can this 'totally Other' that he senses 'act on us, let alone give us any signal of its utterly inaccessible existence?'<sup>13</sup>

### Signals of Transcendence

Two broad answers to this question appear in Steiner's writing. One way arises through moral intuition.<sup>14</sup> Through the 'nausea of the soul' he feels in face of the wickedness of men, he

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<sup>8</sup> Steiner, 'The Great Tautology,' in *No Passion Spent*, 355.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner, 'The Great Tautology,' 360.

<sup>10</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 184.

<sup>11</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 185.

<sup>12</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 186.

<sup>13</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 187.

senses a strange 'counter-echo,' recalling 'a broken contract' and 'an appalling and specific cataclysm.'<sup>15</sup> The other way that this 'totally Other' makes itself known is through human creation, when we understand *creation* in a precise sense. Not only are artistic creations in the conventional sense (literature, poetry, painting, music) charged with the 'background radiation' of the initial moment of creation, but also other mundane creations such as philosophy, architecture and mathematics. These creations cannot be understood, cannot be made 'sense' of, without a wager on God's presence (the 'pre-sense' of our aesthetic experience), which underwrites artistic endeavour.<sup>16</sup>

Steiner discerns two 'primary attributes' of creation, attributes axiomatic to understanding the present analysis. All creation, and that which it engenders, is 'an enactment of freedom.' It might not have been. 'Any authentic mode and consequence of creation arises from the concomitant freedom not to be, not to have come into being.'<sup>17</sup> So creation, 'properly understood and experienced, is another word for "freedom," for that *fiat* or "let there be"...'<sup>18</sup> The second attribute can be discerned insofar as

the work created carries within it, declares to us, with greater or lesser evidence, the fact that it could not have been or could have been otherwise...It is the precedence and constant potentiality of non-being which affords creation its wonder of "givenness" and its vulnerable truth.<sup>19</sup>

Steiner's postulate on creation runs thus: Creation is 'that which is enacted freedom and which includes and expresses in its incarnation the presence of what is absent from it or what could be radically other.'<sup>20</sup>

### Music's unique position

Among the various creations in which Steiner takes 'soundings' of the divine presence, music occupies a remarkable place. Alongside mathematics, to which it stands in close relation, music ranks as 'probably the crowning enigma of our so often dubious presence in this world.'<sup>21</sup> Why so enigmatic? Because, although we may agree with Wittgenstein that the limits of language

<sup>15</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 187. See also *My Unwritten Books*, 207ff.

<sup>16</sup> As to the question of whether this 'god' actually exists or functions just as well as an inspiring bit of rhetoric or fiction, see Robert P. Carroll, 'Toward a Grammar of Creation: On Steiner the Theologian,' in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. and Ronald A. Sharp, eds., *Reading George Steiner* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 266-267.

<sup>17</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 107.

<sup>18</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 152.

mean the limits of our world, music endures as living and stubborn proof, defiant of analytical accounting, of that which lies on the other side of those limits, yet which 'exercises over us a singular domination.'<sup>22</sup> Precisely because we can go no further, because speech so fails us, we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God.<sup>23</sup> 'For many of us [music] comes closer than any other human happening to communicating the possible proximity of the transcendent.'<sup>24</sup>

Thus when Steiner says that we experience music as the 'analogue' to the divine presence pressing upon us, he has in mind primarily its characteristic immediacy or immanence, yet also its transcendence that remains obdurate to the explanatory pretence of discourse.<sup>25</sup> An exposition of sorts can be found in Steiner's work on Heidegger. Here Steiner references the phenomena of music and the musical experience (phenomena overlooked by Heidegger) to explain how human beings experience Being, in a manner undeniable yet utterly recalcitrant to understanding, so much so that 'when we seek to articulate it, "it is always though we were reaching into the void".'<sup>26</sup> Music brings moments of experience, Steiner says, as penetrating and complete as we can register. *But what is it?* Does its being consist in the melody, or pitch, or timbre or relations between tone and interval? In the vibrations transmitted? Does its existence reside in the notes on the page, even if such music is never sounded? 'Where, in the phenomenon "music", do we locate the energies which can transmute the fabric of human consciousness...?'<sup>27</sup>

No clarity readily emerges, yet we *know* what music is.

We know it in the mind's echoing maze and in the marrow of our bones...We assign to it an immensity of *meaning*...Music *means*, even where, most especially where, there is no way whatever to paraphrase this meaning, to restate it in any alternative way, to set it down lexically or formally...In music, being and meaning are inexplicable. They deny paraphrase. But they *are*, and our experience of this 'essentiality' is as certain as in any human awareness.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> George Steiner, "Silence and the Poet," in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Steiner, *My Unwritten Books*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> '[M]usic becomes Steiner's best model for what he is trying to describe with the term "real presence."' 'Karl-Josef Kuschel, "Presence of God? Towards the Possibility of a Theological Aesthetic in an Analysis of George Steiner," *Literature & Theology* 10:1 (March 1996), 11.

<sup>26</sup> George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 44.

Thus the unresolvable crux of the matter: both the source and destination of music lie outside the range of humanity's grasp, yet we come to be brushed by, and participate in, the radical 'inhumanity' within music's powers; such force 'presses upon' us.<sup>29</sup>

Comparing the word to music at this point will prove instructive. While genuine literary creation (as opposed to mere *invention*) can take place, no semantic immaculateness from the conditioning of actual usage is possible for language itself.<sup>30</sup> In a certain sense, language *is* its history. It remains mired in the world. But it also remains removed from the world, on account of its signifying function. Western civilisation has assumed a reliable covenant between word and world, yet although that promissory relation has been thought to be faithful, it remains a *relation*. The word is not the world. Just that gap makes falsehood possible<sup>31</sup> – or worse, the intentional corruption of a language – and just that presumed covenant has been challenged in recent times.

In music, by contrast, we encounter both the immaculateness lacking in language *and* what is 'signified.' Musical sounds and systems of notes that transcribe them have been deployed since time immemorial, yet they are 'firsthand' and 'free hold', evoking the 'new present.'<sup>32</sup> While composers and musicians may imitate the style of others, new musical signatures emerge. So musical notes 'do not entail lexical or syntactic predeterminants; they allow their user the almost naked freedom of the arbitrary.'<sup>33</sup> And this freedom of music strikes us with a penetrating intimacy beyond the reach of language. We thus experience music as the most spiritual and metaphysical of realities and also the most carnal and somatic of signifying acts, one which searches out resonances in our bodies at levels deeper than will or consciousness.<sup>34</sup>

This relationship between word and music accrues further complexity when one considers the infinity yawning at the heart of language. 'The chain of signs is infinite.'<sup>35</sup> Any serious attempt to query the semantic energies that enable our language ultimately will broach the theological, but, maddeningly enough, any semantic content of this theological valuation remains always just out of reach, for the same radical unboundedness at the core of language leading to a theological wager also mocks any attempt to name God. God has no 'demonstrable lodging' in 'natural and unbounded discourse';<sup>36</sup> in attempting to name God we attempt to foreclose the Unbounded or Infinite.

<sup>29</sup> George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 217.

<sup>30</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 155ff.

<sup>31</sup> One of Steiner's reasons for the 'sadness of thought.' George Steiner, 'Ten Possible Reasons for the Sadness of Thought,' *Salmagundi* 146 (Spring 2005), 14ff.

<sup>32</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 217. See also *Errata*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 57.

Poststructuralists splashing in the endless sea of signifiers have glimpsed infinity: the real question is what to make of that infinity. Does it appear as the horizon of a transcendent source of meaning? Or the gaping abyss of nonsense? Steiner approvingly cites Ben Nicholson: 'As I see it...painting and religious experience are the same things, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realisation of that infinity.'<sup>37</sup> But then Steiner poses: 'Yes; but which infinity? Chaos, too, is boundless and free.'<sup>38</sup>

As to what lies behind or before the 'unboundedness' in human language, whether 'generative infinitude' precedes human thought and imaginary representation,' Steiner answers simply: 'We do not know. We cannot, save metaphorically, ask in words of that which may lie before words.'<sup>39</sup> And yet: 'Though there is a sense, again metaphysically resistant and crucial, in which music does just that.'<sup>40</sup>

There thus remains a struggle between language and music, a religious-metaphysical conflict that Steiner understands to be exemplified at the heart of Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. Moses, who often speaks while Aaron sings, addresses God as 'omnipresent, invisible and inconceivable,' and although Moses has encountered the divine word, that word remains incommensurate to human imagining and discourse.<sup>41</sup> Aaron's translation of the purity of Moses' vision into the sensuousness of the singing voice dooms the two men into irremediable antagonism. To employ a description encountered above, the 'monologue' of God does not avail itself to human speech or hearing, for our speech 'represents' and 'images,' and 'such representation and imaging falsifies revealed, absolute truths.'<sup>42</sup> In that sense God remains mute to us. Yet while the poetic symbols we use (music, for example) may communicate something of God, the discursive content of those symbols remains unavailable.<sup>43</sup> For 'music refutes images.'<sup>44</sup>

### Music and freedom

Given such a harsh demarcation between words and music, what precisely does music bequeath to us? The aesthetic experience in general, Steiner says, confers upon us the experience of freedom: freedom in face of, in resistance to, the inexorable march of time and the inevitability of

<sup>37</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Steiner, "Schoenberg's Moses and Aaron," in *Language and Silence*, 135.

<sup>42</sup> Steiner, 'The Great Tautology,' in *No Passion Spent*, 357.

<sup>43</sup> Steiner, "Schoenberg's Moses and Aaron," in *Language and Silence*, 134-135.

<sup>44</sup> Steiner, 'The Great Tautology,' 358.

our death. This participation in the 'pragmatic metaphor of eternity' places the arts on a similar experiential plane as that of the religious. 'It is the production and reception of works of art, in the widest sense, which enables us to share in the experiencing of duration, of time unbounded. Without the arts, the human psyche would stand naked in the face of personal extinction. Wherein would lie the logic of madness and despair.'<sup>45</sup>

Music brings specificity to this experience of 'time unbounded.' Steiner does not refer to a cessation of time. While literature derives its compelling power to shape worlds (and our perception of our world) from its ability to configure tenses for us, 'the relations to time in music are not only of the essence, but autonomous as in no other human activity.'<sup>46</sup> While music's present tense event-character is of the essence, it is temporally differentiated; it presents itself as 'time organised.'

Each piece of serious music 'takes time out' and makes of itself an independent phenomenality. The capacity of music to operate simultaneously along horizontal and vertical axes, to proceed simultaneously in opposite directions...may well constitute the nearest that men and women can come to absolute freedom.<sup>47</sup>

This temporal organisation reposes upon the distinction between time mathematically *standardised* and technically *measured* (connected historically to the notion of an unchanging eternity) versus time *experienced* as 'duration,' or the 'current of individual experience.'<sup>48</sup> Formally or objectively, music organises time by way of rhythm, pitch, harmonic function, timbre, etc; so the marking of the metronome refers us to the conventions of an idealised time.<sup>49</sup> Yet, in music, such fundamental elements as 'length and brevity, speed and slowness, are both time-bound and time-free.'<sup>50</sup> The length and cadence of 'the musical unit and structure as performed and heard are impossible to systematise or standardise exactly.'<sup>51</sup> The acoustic conditions of the space in which we play a piece invariably affect performance and reception, and of course no two instruments will ever produce perfect uniformity.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, while each piece of music 'enacts a duration specific to itself,' the combination of factors singularly melded in that piece – metronomic relations, acoustic phenomena, the psychology of audition and recall - will invariably differ with each performance.

<sup>45</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 214-215.

<sup>46</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 202.

<sup>50</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 202.

<sup>51</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 202-203.

<sup>52</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 203.

Thus there is to any piece of music what Steiner calls a *twofold timeliness*.<sup>53</sup> Indeed the vitality of a musical piece seems to hinge on this; precisely the 'mechanical isochrony' makes much recorded music often seem dead to us.<sup>54</sup> Being grasped by music as 'time organised' reveals time as that which has been 'made organic;' in other words, it provides an abode of freedom *for us* in which it 'liberates us from the enforcing beat of biological and physical-mathematical clocks.'<sup>55</sup> In fact, the time that music takes for us and that which it gives as we experience it 'is the only *free time* granted us prior to death.'<sup>56</sup>

How does this freedom of music affect us? The descriptions are intuitively familiar: music can madden, heal, break (or mend) the heart and so on.<sup>57</sup> But more than this, music locates us within the intimacy of the struggle between life and death, being and non-being. 'I believe,' Steiner says, 'the modulation of music towards our apprehension and sufferance of death to be of the essence.'<sup>58</sup> And even more: 'What we can say, a saying both exceeding and falling short of responsible knowledge, is that there is that in music which conveys both the grave constancy, the finality of death, and a certain refusal of that very finality.'<sup>59</sup>

### Music, being and nothingness

A 'certain refusal' of the 'finality' of death? One is tempted at this point to discount Steiner's rhetoric as so much sound and fury. But his reflections on music and the nothingness of death deserve serious consideration when seen (or heard) against the background of the nature of creation. Like poetry and art, music relates us 'to that in being which is not ours,' but, considered in light of the primordial fiat of creation, the immediacy in this instance is of another order. The 'let there be,' the radical freedom of creation, has meaning only in relation to 'let there not be.'

We might then think of music as a time in conversation with inert timelessness or nothingness. 'Music is silence interrupted. As each note emerges and as it dies away, it remains in dialogue with silence,'<sup>60</sup> a dialogue formalised by the fundamental elements of musical organisation: the intervals and pauses between notes, bars, movements, etc. Inquiring after the origin of new music runs us up against the ineffable: it emerges from the silence of 'non-being.'<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 203.

<sup>54</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 203.

<sup>55</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 196-197. See Steiner's comments in *Grammars* on the 'time world' or temporal space that artistic creation generates (201).

<sup>56</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 197. Emphasis original.

<sup>57</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 197.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 226.

<sup>60</sup> Steiner, *Grammars*, 108.

<sup>61</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 82.

Is this silence the same as that suggested by Eckhardt or Celan? If so, one cannot help but observe: it has not remained mute.

Silence is not the only 'undeclared' dialogue partner in music, of course. Again, music may be organised time for us, but it confronts us in all the creaturely texture and specificity of the world of sound: 'The physics of the audible sound, the physiology of its reception entail the emission and audition of overtones and undertones around each note or chord...The unstated ambience of extended tonality surrounds, prolongs, tempers each musical fact and form with a sustaining, literally vibrant context.'<sup>62</sup>

Music thus carries within itself, and places us in an immediacy to, the *essential* (in the precise philosophical sense) relationship between being and nothingness. Steiner even ventures to define music as 'the soliloquy of being, of the original *fiat* echoing itself.'<sup>63</sup> That may not be God's voice as conventional religion understands it, but, Steiner would say, it is close. We encounter the mysterious intelligibility intrinsic to creation emerging from this *fiat*; in music we are touched by 'the logic at work in the springs of being that generate vital forms.'<sup>64</sup> Thus when we experience the temporality, the rhythm of music, this soul's 'secret arithmetic' puts us in touch with something of the original music of creation, the 'music of the spheres.'<sup>65</sup> And if (following Schopenhauer) music will exist even after our universe is effaced, then, Steiner muses, the 'temporalities within a musical act and structure' might indeed be 'independent' from those of merely biological or physical laws.<sup>66</sup>

To compress the previous analyses: We apprehend the essential characteristics of creation by considering the temporally differentiated ontology of music. Anthropological correlates follow. Even as Dante describes an arrow striking home before the music of the bow string has ceased, the fact that the vibration persists in us after the sound ceases intimates the existence of 'values and energies in the human person – and *per-sonare* means, precisely, a "sounding," a "saying through" – which transcend death.'<sup>67</sup> When music possesses us, it does so completely, penetrating both body and mind. And in such moments, the poles of time itself, 'immediacy, recollection [and] anticipation are often inextricably fused.'<sup>68</sup> In short, we have in Steiner the suggestion of a personal comprehension by, and ontic appropriateness to, that transcendence intrinsic to music; human beings seem wondrously 'fitted' for the reception of the primary ontological vibration.

<sup>62</sup> Steiner, *Grammars*, 108-109.

<sup>63</sup> Steiner, *Errata*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 218.

<sup>65</sup> Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet,' in *Language and Silence*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> Steiner, *Grammars*, 60. See also Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Bk III (Dover Publications, 1966).

<sup>67</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 226.

<sup>68</sup> Steiner, *Martin Heidegger*, 43.

Steiner admits that, with his musings on these particular energies in the human being, he has crossed into the realm of the religious; indeed, throughout the ages music's celebration of the mystery of transcendence has had an intimate relation to religion.<sup>69</sup> But the transcendent vitality conveyed by music outstrips our feeble attempts to circumscribe it by the particularities of any religion. The 'core-relation,' Steiner says, 'far exceeds any specific religious motive or occasion.'<sup>70</sup>

[M]usic puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable...The meaning of the meanings of music transcend. It has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed. Or to put it reciprocally: for many human beings, religion has been the music they believe in.<sup>71</sup>

The infinite and triune music that possesses Robert Jenson now remains to be heard.

### **Jenson's Fugued Trinitarian Theology**

At its most barbed, Jenson's project constitutes a polemic against any Christian theology that forswears the identification of God as 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit,' the sacred expression that functions as both a 'compressed telling the total narrative by which Scripture identifies God and a personal name for the God so specified...'<sup>72</sup> The connection between hermeneutics and community in Jenson's theology could hardly be closer, and the ecclesiological upshot no doubt has been heard by some as 'fighting talk': those who do not or will not identify God by this name 'belong to some other community.'<sup>73</sup>

Jenson motors his relentless Trinitarianism with two radical moves: a redefinition, based upon the biblical narrative, of the eternity of God as temporal infinity, and a shift in the categories of knowing appropriate to this God's life, from metaphysical and epistemological repositories based on *vision* and *substance* to that of *speaking / hearing* and *music*. The intelligibility of this essay depends in large measure on understanding these moves.

<sup>69</sup> 'Music's otherwise inexpressible powers of signification appear to be the natural simulacrum of religious experience.' Steiner, *My Unwritten Books*, 200.

<sup>70</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 218.

<sup>71</sup> Steiner, *Real Presences*, 218. Christopher Knight has commented on Steiner's linkage of music with religion: 'It is an extraordinary rhetorical flight, but once it is over, what are we left with? Are we to worship music? Mathematics? Or the Abstraction that they imply?' Christopher Knight, 'George Steiner's Religion of Abstraction,' *Religion & Literature* 28. no.1 (Spring 1996), 79. I would suggest, in response, that many frequent concertgoers go precisely on account of the ecstatic experience provided by the music; it is the closest that many will ever get to the experience of worship.

<sup>72</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume I: The Triune God* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 46. Hereafter *ST* 1.

<sup>73</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 46. See also Jenson's provocative comments at the conclusion of *The Triune Identity: God according to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 185ff.

### Temporal and Triune Infinity

We will take the question of eternity first. Contrary to the basic ontology lesson our Greek forbears taught us – that being is immunity to time<sup>74</sup> – Jenson argues that God is identified not merely *by* the events recounted by Scripture (centrally, Exodus and Resurrection), but *with* them. The coherence of Jenson’s theology hangs upon correctly distinguishing these prepositions. For he means to say that the ‘blatantly temporal events’ recounted in Scripture ‘belong’ to God’s very deity.<sup>75</sup> If God were identified merely *by* the Exodus or Resurrection, and not *with* them, the identification thereby would be a revelation ‘ontologically other’ than God. ‘The revealing events would be our clues *to* God, but would not *be* God.’<sup>76</sup>

‘Normal religion,’ Jenson says, presumes a gap between revelation and deity. And so we embark on the religious quest to make out what lies behind revelation, to throw across that span between revelation and the nameless God or Golden Calf or image of the Great Mother. Contrary to all such attempts, the doctrine of the Trinity is a ‘conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified *by* and *with* the particularly plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ.’<sup>77</sup> Expressed otherwise: this God’s identity is constituted in *dramatic coherence*.<sup>78</sup>

Jenson’s metaphysically audacious claim that ‘blatantly temporal events’ recounted by Scripture belong to God’s deity constitutes nothing less than a redefinition of what it means to be God. Whatever else this proposal may imply, in refiguring what we mean by God’s eternity in the course of identifying the biblical *dramatic dei personae* it is clear that God’s eternity cannot be used (by God or us!) to shield the divine life from the contingencies of history. Yet Jenson has no truck with ideas that would reduce God to a part of the world or put God at the ‘mercy’ of its historical processes.

The eternity Jenson pursues arises from the three active agents’ relationship to time, as depicted in the biblical drama. In expositing the persons of God’s identity, the ‘threeness’ for Jenson must not be construed as a mathematical curiosity that bears, for example, interesting comparison to other religions. God exists as triune insofar as the persons of God’s identity occupy each ‘pole’ of time: the difference of past and future, and their meeting in a specious

<sup>74</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 209-210.

<sup>75</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 49. Jenson is frequently charged with fatally compromising the doctrine of God at this point (a la Hegel). See David Bentley Hart’s scathing critique of Jenson in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Eerdmans, 2003), 161-167.

<sup>76</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 59.

<sup>77</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 60. Emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 64.

present.<sup>79</sup> In short, God's time does not exteriorise itself apart from the peculiarities of God's own triune being.<sup>80</sup>

In rejecting many and repeated theological attempts to reconcile the God of the biblical drama to God conceived as a timeless monad, Jenson adopts Gregory Nyssen's understanding of God as the mutual action of the three identities' energies.<sup>81</sup> 'God happens.'<sup>82</sup> The being of God cannot be 'a something' but must be understood as a 'going-on, a sequentially palpable event, like a kiss or a train wreck.'<sup>83</sup> This unconstrained *ousia* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be most adequately described by the notion of *infinity*,<sup>84</sup> understood as none other than the infinite mutual action of the three persons. 'What happens among them accepts no boundaries; nothing can hinder what they enact.'<sup>85</sup> Jenson is not speaking of spatial infinity; rather temporal infinity. 'God is not infinite because he extends indefinitely, but because no temporal activity can keep up with the activity that he is.'<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps the most angular feature of this revision resides in its theological rehabilitation of futurity. Contrary to a host of well-meaning but temporally-challenged theologians' insistence on God's immunity to time, Jenson says that Gregory defines God's being by endless futurity.<sup>87</sup> Futurity, the pole of time by which it is time, determines divine infinity. 'To be God is always to be open to and always to open a future, transgressing all past-imposed conditions.'<sup>88</sup> Far from saying merely that God transcends temporal limits (and affirming Barth at this point), Jenson maintains that both source and goal are real in God, but temporal infinity means that source and goal are both real and (contrary to Barth's *reine Dauer*) *asymmetrical* to God. The Spirit's particular province lies in lending asymmetry to the divine life. As the Spirit, God is 'primally future to himself and *only thereupon* past and present for himself.'<sup>89</sup> 'God is not eternal in that he adamantly remains as he began, but in that he always creatively opens to what he will be; not in

<sup>79</sup> The following statement is representative of this way of thinking about temporality in a triune vein: 'In Israel's Bible, the God of Israel is characteristically "in the beginning"; his Spirit is his power from and toward the End, and the Shekinah, in all its modes, is the mediation of the two.' Jenson, *ST* 1, 89.

<sup>80</sup> For all his criticisms of Jenson, David Bentley Hart recognizes that when Jenson speaks of 'divine temporality, he surely does not mean to suggest that God experiences time as we do: as loss, as the possibility of things that may never come, as always fragmentary and haunted by disappointments and vain longings, as a future never yet possessed and only dimly imagined, as a present forever slipping away in into oblivion, as a past mourned or regretted.' David Bentley Hart, 'The Lively God of Robert Jenson,' *First Things* 156 (October 2005) [http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id\\_article=240](http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=240). Accessed 23 June 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 214.

<sup>82</sup> See Ted Peters, 'God Happens: The Timeliness of the Triune God,' *The Christian Century*, April 1, 1998 <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=79>. Accessed 23 June 2008.

<sup>83</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 214.

<sup>84</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 214–215.

<sup>85</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 215.

<sup>86</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 216. See Jenson's treatment of 'triune infinity' in *The Triune Identity*, 161–182.

<sup>87</sup> David Bentley Hart challenges Jenson's reading of Gregory. See *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 161.

<sup>88</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 216.

<sup>89</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 217. Emphasis added.

that he hangs on, but in that he gives and receives; not in that he perfectly persists, but in that he perfectly anticipates.<sup>90</sup>

In biblical terms: God's everlasting covenant is identical with a steadfast love that is *faithful*. 'The eternity of Israel's God is his faithfulness.' God's eternity does not mean that God secures himself from time, but that God remains faithful to divine commitments within time.<sup>91</sup> To lend philosophical specificity, however, Jenson offers the following compact metaphysical summary:

The life of God is constituted in a structure of relations, whose own referents are narrative. This narrative structure is constrained by a difference between whence and whither that one cannot finally refrain from calling 'past' and 'future,' and that is congruent with the distinction between the Father and the Spirit. This difference is not relative and therefore not measurable; nothing in God recedes into the past or approaches from the future. But the difference is also absolute: the arrow of God's eternity, like the arrow of causal time, does not reverse itself. Whence and whither in God are not like right and left or up and down on a map, but are like before and after in a narrative.

This summary warrants close attention.<sup>92</sup> We might state the underlying aporia as follows: how can God be Lord of (i.e. sovereignly free in relation to) time, when *of* here cannot – on the basis of the biblical testimony – mean freedom *from* time? (Again, our prepositions begin to buckle.) In answer (to summarise my earlier summary), Jenson has attempted to think the difference between God and the tradition's construal of Being, by refiguring the poles of time along the lines of temporal infinity, when that infinity is grasped as the narratively emplotted life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>93</sup> Past and future, Jenson says in the above quotation, are 'congruent' with the difference within God's triune life. In other words: Assuredly, there is past (a real past), but not a past that can elude the ever-expanding and surprising life of the Spirit, for Father comprehends the past, revealing himself as the nascence and memory of creation.

<sup>90</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 217. Cf also Jenson's comments on p. 66. 'Since the Lord's self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end, not at birth but at death, not in *persistence* but in *anticipation*. The biblical God is not eternally himself in that he persistently instantiates a beginning in which he already is all he ever will be; he is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be.' (emphasis original)

<sup>91</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 217.

<sup>92</sup> These sentences appear again almost verbatim in the second volume of the *Systematic*, in Jenson's discussion of 'time, created being, and space' (chapter 17). In the second volume, the narrative structure is said to be 'enabled' (rather than 'constrained') by the 'difference between whence and whither.' Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Volume II: The Works of God* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35. Hereafter *ST* 2.

<sup>93</sup> Failure to take seriously this experiment in rethinking eternity on a triune basis has caused otherwise careful theologians such as George Hunsinger to accuse Jenson of subordinating the doctrine of God to the doctrine of eschatology. For Jenson's response, see his 'Response to Watson and Hunsinger,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55:2 (2002), 230-231.

Assuredly, there is future (real future), but not a future that can outstrip the Father's intention nor surprise him, for the Spirit who *is* the expansion of God's own infinite life brings about the future. As such, the Spirit as future comes to both God and creation. And, assuredly, the difference *is* absolute. Why? Because the narrative in which these referents of God's life are emplotted amounts to more than gibberish. The story makes sense and has a denouement.

God proves himself to be eternal in the way this story proceeds, and by none other.<sup>94</sup> The story receives its temporal contours by and from the identities: the Spirit who comes to us from God's last future, and who remains shaped by the Son, who lives utterly for the Father and those to whom the Father has sent him, and the Father who intends himself in the Son.<sup>95</sup> I will not here rehearse the Son's history within the life of the triune God,<sup>96</sup> but with respect to divine infinity Jenson's basic point should be clear: this infinity resiles and expands itself as the Father's intention in the Son through the Spirit; in other words, it exists as 'a specific loving consciousness.'<sup>97</sup> In sum: 'The temporal infinity that opens before us and so embraces us as the triune God's eternity is the inexhaustibility of one *event*. The event is the appropriation of all other events by the love made actual as Jesus of Nazareth.'<sup>98</sup>

### Infinite Triune Music

The second radical move noted above involves a shift in the categories of *knowing* appropriate to God's life, from *vision* and *substance* to that of *speaking / hearing* and *music*.<sup>99</sup> Jenson's investigation into how God is known constitutes one of the most the most intriguing sections of his systematics. To have being is to be knowable. But the kind of being God has is anything but simple – so how is God known?<sup>100</sup> We must consider, Jenson says, not only the fact that God is triune (rather than 'monadic'), but also that God's 'knowability cannot be understood in isolation

<sup>94</sup>For example, whereas 'normal gods' transcend death by their immunity to it or identification with it, the triune God 'transcends death by triumphing over it, by the Son's dying and the Father's raising him again.' Jenson *ST* 1, 219.

<sup>95</sup> Jenson *ST* 1, 219.

<sup>96</sup> See Jenson's chapters on "Jesus," "Crucifixion" and "Resurrection" in *ST* 1, 165-206.

<sup>97</sup> *ST* 1, 220.

<sup>98</sup> *ST* 1, 221. Emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> The radicality of Jenson's position must be appreciated against the Hellenistic philosophical emphasis on the relation between being and form (*eidōs*) or that pattern instantiated in whatever *is* so 'formed' - but which itself remains unaffected by time. Being so formed satisfies our mind's desire for absolute assurance and 'transcendence over time's surprises.' This *eidōs* is the shape seen by the mind's eye ('being is appearing'). In this way, 'to be' in the fullest sense is 'to be divine.' *ST* 1, 209ff.

<sup>100</sup> Jenson holds to the hugely unpopular position that the '*condition* of the possibility of knowing' God on 'our' side of the God-human relation is the church. This may seem to foreclose on any possible fruitful intersection of ideas between Steiner and Jenson, but I am going to bracket this 'condition' for the present analysis and return to it later when I grapple with the question of what 'natural theology' could possibly mean. For now I want to examine the participatory character of knowing God.

from the other ways in which being is open to participation.<sup>101</sup> What can such a statement mean? Let us try: God exists as the living exchange of the triune persons and knows himself only by way of that ongoing event in which the triune persons all participate. God's self-knowledge is mediated via participation in a community of otherness. Since *our* knowing God is not dissimilar to other events in which we must participate in order to know them, and our knowledge of God cannot arise from ways other than how God knows himself, knowing God must mean participation - of being 'accommodated' within the divine life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>102</sup>

Jenson analyses God's peculiar being as open to this kind of participation by way of the four classical 'transcendentals': unity, truth, goodness and beauty. The last of these transcendentals bears directly upon the question of God and music. Jenson (following Jonathan Edwards) is careful to say that God is truth and goodness *because* he is beauty. That might strike one as strange, but let us remember that the triune conversation that is righteousness can be none other than the perfect harmony of the triune communal life. In other words, if God's righteousness is the perfect mutuality between Father, Son and Holy Spirit,<sup>103</sup> then no standard of truth or goodness floats abstractly above the resplendent and temporally differentiated life of God. 'In that the triune conversation is righteousness, it is the perfect harmony of the triune communal life. And the harmony of discourse taken for itself is its beauty, more precisely, its *music*.'<sup>104</sup> 'God's beauty is the actual living exchange between Father, Son and Spirit, as this exchange is

<sup>101</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 225.

<sup>102</sup> Thus when Jenson says that 'God is knowable only insofar as God is actually known,' he is not stating the obvious; his point is that God does not have set *x* of properties that in discerning we have managed to pull back the covers on deity. God does not 'beneficently affect us causally.' Jenson, *ST* 1, 311.

<sup>103</sup> On the synonymousness of divine righteousness with the triune life of God, see Eberhard Jüngel, "Living Out of Righteousness: God's Action – Human Agency," in *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 247-50; also Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (Edinburgh and New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 82-85.

<sup>104</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 234. In *ST* 1, Jenson explicitly avers he is not merely waxing poetic. Speaking of the above description of orchestration, triune musicality and so on, Jenson writes: 'The previous paragraph is likely to be read as metaphor, and indeed as metaphor run wild. It is not so intended, or not in any sense of 'metaphor' that is alternative to 'concept.' Such words as 'harmony' are here conscripted to be metaphysically descriptive language more malleable to the gospel's grasp of reality than is, for central contrary example, the language of 'substance' in its native Aristotelian or Cartesian or Lockean senses...there is no *a priori* reason why, for example, 'substance' – which after all simply meant 'what holds something up' - should be apt for conscription into metaphysical service and, for example, 'tune' should not.' Douglas Farrow has judged Jenson's work to be 'marred' by the latter's 'deepening of his speculative groove' – referring to Jenson's critique of conventional substance ontology - commenting that 'God is not a fugue, and the fugue is not a model of God,' 'Robert Jenson's *Systematic Theology*: Three Responses,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1:1 (March 1999), 95. Jenson's response to George Hunsinger's review might serve well here also: 'Some readers will not allow the project its own terms but will simply carry on in the assumption that their inherited construal of reality is the only one possible and so must after all be that of the writer; or if they notice deviations will assume that these must derive from some – undesirable - variant of the same inherited construal, and must be classifiable as 'Hegelian' or 'existentialist' or whatever...A reader who will not entertain a text's own general construal of things must of course again and again encounter propositions and phrases that seem badly out of whack...' 'Response to Watson and Hunsinger,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55:2 (2002), 230, 231.

perfect simply as exchange, as it *sings*.<sup>105</sup> Again, following Edwards: 'God is truth and goodness because he is beauty, beauty of the sort that music has.'<sup>106</sup> Whatever other kind of knowing might be appropriate to this God, we know God as God knows himself as that beauty – as music. To be God is to be enjoyable; to know God is to enjoy him.<sup>107</sup>

Jenson's introduction of singing and music in describing God's life at this point has momentous consequences. On account of the nature of God's being (infinity emplotted by the triune persons) and the peculiar 'knowability' thrust upon us on account of this life, Jenson is seeking a conceptuality that does not remain a conceptuality, a conceptuality beyond the objectifying temptations of visual depictions and causal 'substantialist' metaphysical descriptions of God. Jenson could easily concur with Steiner that 'music refutes images.' The 'actual living exchange' of the triune persons, Jenson says, *sings* because this way of describing the life of God proffers an aural/oral construal more fitting to the state of affairs in which God is never without his Word, on account of the Spirit, who frees Father and Son for each other and in doing so frees them for us.

Indeed, one struggles to imagine what else an aural/oral beauty comprised of several voices could be, other than *singing*. The biblical construal of God's living discourse can hardly be imagined as a monologue, as in Steiner, neither a monotone chant nor a predictable tune. The persons are not simply interchangeable; they cannot be reduced to each other's 'parts,' and the real discord in the world in which we hear their voices must be heard within a more comprehensive harmony. Thus in Jenson, contra Steiner, no antagonism intrudes between Word and Music. Moses and Aaron at table are set down.

Because this singing emerges not as the *interpretandum* of any other discourse, because it has no purpose beyond itself and because the discourse that is God is not other than its sheer occurrence as the divine perichoresis, Jenson ventures that we might think of such discourse as not only singing but even as 'pure music,'<sup>108</sup> which is a potentially dangerous statement. To follow Jenson's description, if such music could be abstracted from the actual discourse, then a door might be opened for conceiving God beyond his own rhetorical event, in whose life our participation would be a mystical, wordless and perhaps wholly sensual affair. God is music, music is God, and so forth. Jenson's worst liberal nightmares would be a conclusion drawn from his own theology.

However, Jenson insists: 'It is the peculiarity of the [theological?!] aesthetic that in apprehending beauty we abstract from the content of discourse *without* becoming abstract in our

<sup>105</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 235. Emphasis original.

<sup>106</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 235.

<sup>107</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 234.

<sup>108</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 236.

understanding.<sup>109</sup> The infinity of music, yes, but that infinity does not resist narrative configuration; indeed it emerges and remains emplotted along the trajectory of the ongoing drama of divine persons in relation to creation. As this music is inexhaustibly and dramatically configured, there remains no abstraction from the actual life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit when Jenson offers: ‘God, we may thus say, is a melody. And as there are three singers who take each their part, a further specification suggests itself: the melody is fugued.’<sup>110</sup> Jenson closes the first volume of his systematics ‘with this evocation of God’s being, beyond which there is no more to say: God is a great *fugue*. There is nothing so capacious as a fugue,’<sup>111</sup> indeed, how could there be, when that capaciousness is understood as temporal infinity? Moreover, Jenson makes the claim (with which Steiner would certainly concur) that ‘a developed piece of music is a world we can inhabit in a way we cannot inhabit a painting or sculpture. One lives in a fugue while it is going on.’<sup>112</sup> In part two of this essay I pursue the details of this inhabitation further.

In sum, Jenson and Steiner hear and reflect upon the music of the spheres similarly, but the similarities must be understood within a greater difference. Having been enveloped by music, having heard and indwelt it rapturously, Steiner reflects on its dynamics: its ontological tension between being and nothingness, its temporal differentiation, its gift of freedom and its intrusive cerebral and somatic effect on human beings. His reflections in these areas are remarkably similar to Jenson’s description of the dynamic life of the triune God as a triune fugue. But then, on account of both music’s undeniably live presence yet resistance to any reductionism to rationality or words, Steiner takes music as a hint of that being which lies beyond human cognizance, which is to say: God. The opacity and irreducibility of phenomenon and experience drives Steiner to think the divine Being as essentially impenetrable, forever on the far side of human apprehension. The effect of music upon us is *analogous* to that of the pressure of the divine presence, on account of its meaning beyond words, its immediacy, and its fusion of form and content, and so on. It is analogous to the divine presence, given the limit or boundary situation into which music throws our attempts at rationalization and discourse, and not on account of the dynamics and capacities themselves mentioned above.

For Jenson, whose *terminus a quo* for thinking about the divine life must be found in the biblical narrative and not the musical experience, God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the phenomenon of music readily lends itself as conceptual grist for a metaphysic appropriate to the kind of being God is. We overhear and participate in the triune fugue in the church’s doxology as we do nowhere else, although one might venture that whenever we hear music we are

<sup>109</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 236. Emphasis mine.

<sup>110</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 236.

<sup>111</sup> Jenson, *ST* 1, 236. Emphasis original.

<sup>112</sup> Robert W. Jenson, ‘Christ as Culture 2: Christ as Art,’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6:1 (2004), 72. Emphasis added.

touched by, and reminded of, the music of the spheres: the harmony of which exists only on account of God's triune life.

In the second part of this paper, I hope to show that, while Steiner's analysis of music is profoundly suggestive and can be appropriated with great benefit to lend a musically descriptive thickness to Jenson's trinitarian theology, a disjunction occurs between Steiner's rapturous analysis of music and his actual default doctrine of God, which remains, philosophically speaking, pedestrian.

In looking at Steiner's project from a perspective shaped by Jenson's theology, one might ask: Why *not* follow up on the particulars given in the phenomenon of music and think of the divine being precisely as creatively capacious of both being and non-being, as temporally differentiated, as freedom-and future-bestowing, as intrinsically capable of incarnation, etc? What necessitates thinking of the divine being as somehow withdrawn and autistic, behind the phenomenon? Why not listen to the phenomenon itself and say, "The divine life is like this"?