

# Klank als religieuze presentie

## De muzikale gestalte in een seculiere tijd belicht vanuit werk van Messiaen

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### 1. Introduction

This book seeks to comprehend the character (*Gestalt*) of the musical work in a secular age by viewing the musical work as a religious dimension in the reality of the sensory world. In doing so, I offer a critique on modern concert practice, in which music is seen from an aesthetic perspective exclusively. It is not my intention to search for the religious *in* the music, but for the religious *of* the music. This approach begins with a broad notion of religion.

### 2. Von Balthasar: theology of beauty

Part one attempts a theological approach, with a particular reference to Von Balthasar's theology of beauty. Von Balthasar makes the theological concept of incarnation suitable for an approach in terms of revelation understood as a form (*Offenbarungsgestalt*). In view of this approach, I regard musical compositions as sounds in the character (*Gestalt*). Von Balthasar's conception of beauty which is transcendental, contains three aspects that are analyzed and applied to several pieces of music in this book. First, the 'one dimensional structure' points to an undivided unity of form (*Form*) and content (*Inhalt*), which implies that a separate layer of meaning cannot be detected beneath the sensory surface. On the contrary, mystery reveals itself only in the perceptible form. Second, the aspect of manifestation implies that there is no sense of reference, whilst a sign or a symbol refer to something external. Nevertheless this lack of reference can be seen as a positive aspect, since it suggests the 'positivity' of sound as a formal givenness. Third, the paradoxical nature of the invisible mystery (*Tiefengeheimnis des Seins*) in a sensory form shows that a piece of music concerns a sensory form which comes to the fore amongst all other sounds in the world. This aspect is in line with Von Balthasar's 'broad' standpoint of *analogia entis*. For this reason, rather than experiencing music from an aesthetic judgment as an 'art work' (as the work concept does), I regard music as a 'sound phenomenon'. In this view, I criticize the 'meaning culture' of the western hermeneutical tradition in accordance with Gumbrecht, and I add his conception

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of presence culture to the understanding of music. The mystery is manifested in the sensory reality by the character of sound. Since my standpoint concerns the perceptive sensibility and the immanent experience of time, the character of music can be regarded as a historical *kairos*.

Von Balthasar's understanding of beauty can be extended to the notion of the sublime, which enables one to interpret Messiaen's music from the viewpoint of Brilleburg Wurth's typology of the musically sublime. Von Balthasar took his standpoint in the biblical-theological understanding of *Herrlichkeit*, which suggests a broader perspective than the notion of beauty. Although Kant put the sublime over against the beautiful, I consider the sublime a paradoxical subcategory of beauty, on the basis of a musical example, derived from Messiaen's work.

Brilleburg Wurth's typology of the musically sublime is not intended as a theological typology. Nonetheless it leads us to an understanding of music which is analogous to a religious manifestation. I analyze two parts from Messiaen's *L'Ascension* (1933-34) and two parts from his *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969) in terms of the three notions of the musically sublime: *Indeterminacy*, *Sehnsucht*, and *Formwidrigkeit*.

Von Balthasar's viewpoint is exclusively theologically oriented, as a consequence of his natural theology, which makes his standpoint too apologetic to bridge with an understanding from contemporary secular concert practice. I view this secular concert practice as the dominant context of the music studied in the present book. Nevertheless Von Balthasar's conception of *Gestalt* as an one-dimensional unity of form and content remains the foundation of my argument throughout this book, which stresses the presence of the sensible sound phenomenon within the realm of the world.

### 3. Taylor's philosophy of culture: the religious in a secular age

Part two deals with Taylor's philosophy of culture which concerns the religious in a secular age. Taylor defines secularity in a new way, turning his opinion over against the 'secularity thesis'. His 'third type' of secularity does not contradict with religion, but is shaped as a radical consequence originated from Reformation theological thought. I apply three basic features of modern culture, as they are found in Taylor's *A Secular Age*, to modern concert culture which I regard as essentially secular. At first I describe how the piece of music can be perceived as an object of 'buffered identity'. The 'open cosmos' in modern culture recalls a world experience of endless emptiness, which reshapes social spheres in which citizens gather in a democratic structure. One of these public spheres is the concert hall, where art as a 'higher time' gives inter-punctuation to the homogeneous time experience. The art takes a religious role in doing so. Finally I apply the concept of 'higher times' to the level of the performing time of the piece of music, which transforms time by means of sound and rhythm thereby manifesting the 'higher' in the sensory reality.

Using Stoker's typology of transcendence, I suggest that different pieces of music create 'higher time' in different ways. I regard Messiaen's *Diptyque* as an articulation of immanent transcendence, while I illustrate Xenakis's *Gmeeeoorh* as an example of radical immanence and Arvo Pärt's *Annum per annum* as transcendence as alterity. All the pieces are in their own rights examples of the 'fourth way' (the way of maximal demand) Taylor seeks – the 'subtler languages of the arts', which do justice to the transcendent as well as to the ambiguity of world experience simultaneously. As in the first part, in this part the emphasis is also on the sensory form of the musical character (*Gestalt*) – the *surplus* is situated in the expression.

#### 4. Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics

Part three discusses Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics. Gadamer, like Von Balthasar, focusses on the realization of truth by means of beauty (the beautiful). He emphasizes the process of understanding. The horizons of the object (the text or the piece of music) and the subject (the reader or the listener) melt together when a process of assumption comes into being. A pre-requisite for this process is formed by the 'strangeness' or 'other-ness' between subject and object. This 'otherness' is not a negative fact, but forms a positive condition, as much as the distance in time does not form a gap that blocks the assumption, but the distance is filled with *Wirkungsgeschichte* (on the side object) and life experience (on the side of the subject). The distance in time then contains the positive value of 'filled time'. This 'filled time' yields at the level of the individual piece of music too. In the dialogical relationship between object and subject, an accumulation of meaning and being comes into being, which is renewed in every new process of understanding. In that condition the piece of music is continuously actualized against every new background of understanding. At the same time, the listener is involved in an affective relationship with the object.

In utilizing Gadamer's hermeneutics and philosophy of art (art as a play), I develop the program in which the structure of the individual piece of music is the standpoint for the process of assumption. This assumption is accomplished by the particular horizon of the individual listener. Gadamer's fusion of horizons is illustrated by interpreting Messiaen's *Méditations II* from the viewpoint of Tillich's article 'Art as Ultimate Reality'. This article deals with five types of religious experience which can be expressed in the visual arts. Tillich's broad perception of religion, which begins with the 'ultimate concern', recalls Gadamer's broad perception of the sacred. All art contains something sacred in his opinion, with which he points to something that overcomes the everyday life experience. The visual character of Messiaen's musical forms build the connection with Tillich's typology, which envisages the religious experience exactly in the visual arts. Out of the five types Tillich describes, the sacramental type and the ecstatic-spiritual one are of particular importance in relation to my interpretation of Messiaen's piece. The sacramental type points to the sensory form as a

positive givenness, as Von Balthasar does in his understanding of *Gestalt*. The ecstatic-spiritual type allows one to interpret Messiaen's mosaic structure as a reality broken into pieces. In doing so the structure opens up something of the mystery of the world, which is committed with the unconditional.

### 5. Von Balthasar, Taylor, Gadamer

Two short sections which deal with common themes of the three philosophers are located between the three parts.

The common theme of Von Balthasar and Taylor lies in the Christology, although both develop their Christology in their own way. Concerning the theme of (transcending) time, Von Balthasar puts a Christology of incarnation to the fore, whereas Taylor presents a Christology of 'radical devotion of love', which functions differently from Von Balthasar's Christology of incarnation, although Taylor's implicit Christological model offers a framework within which pieces of art/music can be understood by breaking through the conventional and well-known.

The common theme between Von Balthasar and Gadamer can be found in the way both develop their aesthetical hermeneutics. Bourgeois compares Von Balthasar's aesthetical hermeneutics with Gadamer's in emphasizing the aspect of 'dialogue'. In addition to this view, I consider the understanding of beauty as a sensory realization of the truth which lies at the center of the two philosophers' theories.