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Musical Scores and the Eternal Present: Theology, Time, and Tolkien by Chiara Bertoglio

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Abstract

Review of Chiara Bertoglio, *Musical Scores and the Eternal Present: Theology, Time, and Tolkien* (2021).

Additional Keywords

Music Theory; Eternity

collection. Some are more suggestive in their observations and conclusions than others, who argue more aggressively their suggested influences. A further note is that the volume addresses parts of the entire legendarium and not solely *Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. As stated at the beginning, real, in-depth consideration of the influence of the Classical world on Tolkien's imagination is yet an area to be mined, though some work has already been done. Further, I hope the volume generates additional interest in the Greek and Roman texts mentioned not only in relation to Tolkien and Lewis, but for their own sake.

—Larry Swain

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MUSICAL SCORES AND THE ETERNAL PRESENT: THEOLOGY, TIME, AND TOLKIEN. Chiara Bertoglio. Eugene, Oregon, Pickwick Publications (an imprint of Wipf and Stock), 2021. xv + 192 p. ISBN 9781725295025. Hardcover, \$41.00, Paper, \$26.00.

IN THIS STRIKING SYNTHESIS, AT ONCE LEARNED AND ACCESSIBLE, Bertoglio applies her broad knowledge as a concert pianist with graduate degrees in theology both to the persistent problem of timeless divine eternity and to taking “Tolkien’s *Ainulindalë* [...] as a filter for rereading the biblical narrative of Genesis” (167). The result is an eminently valuable contribution to studies of philosophical theology in relation to Tolkien’s legendarium. The book reworks and amplifies four earlier articles: “Dissonant Harmonies: Tolkien’s Musical Theodicy,”¹ “High Scores: The Notation of Music, Time and the Eternal Present,” “Dante, Tolkien, and the Supreme Harmony,” and “Polyphony, Collective Improvisation and the Gift of Creation.”

In accordance with its musical topic, the book begins with a *Praeludium*; a *Cadenza* and *Intermezzo* separate the two main parts, and a *Quodlibet* and more personal *Encore* follow the second. The first major section develops the idea of a musical score as a metaphor for divine timelessness, in four chapters: “Time and the Eternal Present” (3-16), “Musical Scores and Temporality” (17-34), “Music as a Syntax of Time” (35-59), and “Observing the Score” (60-78). The idea that the Divine cannot fundamentally exist in time follows directly for a theology which attributes absolute transcendence to the Divine: a Creator which is *totaliter aliter*, totally other than the creation, cannot have its primary existence

¹ I commented briefly on “Dissonant Harmonies” for “The Year’s Work in Tolkien Studies.” I should also note that I am cited in the book, and that I spoke on “Radio la voce di Arda,” on September 10, 2021, at Dr. Bertoglio’s invitation.

in that creation, and that implies having neither a physical place-in-which nor a temporal time-at-which. Granted that direct derivation, however, the idea of divine timelessness also plays a role not only in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine of creation (God does not precede the Creation in time, because time is an element of Creation: asking what God was doing “before” Creation is equivalent to asking what God is doing “east” of Creation) but also in one response to the problem of foreknowledge and free will (God’s omniscience does not conflict with free will because it is not *foreknowledge*, knowledge *in advance* of our actions: transcending time, it is simultaneously contemporaneous with every moment). Divine timelessness with respect to creation was a particular concern of Augustine of Hippo, while timelessness as universal contemporaneity is especially associated with Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*: but both the bishop and the ex-consul struggled to find effective images to express the concept. Bertoglio argues that the development of musical scores, as a way of presenting, synchronically and synoptically, polyphonic melodies that naturally unfold in time, give the image the late antique authors needed: “musical reading and performance [...] come as close as possible to the experience of a simultaneous presence of evolving temporalities, thus representing a powerful human and creatural analogy to the theological concept of ‘eternal present’” (81).

The second part also comprises four chapters: “Beholding God” (87-102), “Polyphonic Improvisations” (103-117), “Discord and Dissonance” (118-144), and “Creation and Sub-Creation” (145-163). If the first section considers God’s timeless knowledge of creation, the second begins with the creatures’ contemplation of divine eternity, particularly as that contemplation is exemplified in the *Aimulindalë*. A Creator with perfect timeless knowledge of the creation knows the fullness of each individual part of that creation: and thus when, through the Creator’s self-revelation, the creature comes to know the Creator, the creature also comes to know its authentic self, the way of being which constitutes its perfect freedom and ultimate happiness.² Again, the metaphor of the musical score applies: creatures living out their natures as seen in the Creator’s self-disclosure are like artists performing the parts that a composer has written for them. The distinction, Bertoglio emphasizes, is that, whereas we commonly understand musicians to be *either* following a score *or* freely improvising, the Creator’s score is precisely an account of the authentic individual freedom in which the Creator holds each creature out of non-

² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*. q.103.a.8, “every inclination of anything, whether natural or voluntary, is nothing but a kind of impression from the first mover; as the inclination of the arrow towards a fixed point is nothing but an impulse received from the archer. Wherefore every agent, whether natural or free, attains to its divinely appointed end, as though of its own accord. For this reason God is said ‘to order all things sweetly’ [Wisdom 8:1].”

existence: “the song of creation is the coincidence of the creatures’ free will with God’s will” (90). Music history does, Bertoglio goes on to point out, have at least approximations to this combination of improvisation with following a score: in *discant* and *faburden*, polyphonic music features individual musicians improvising, according to set guidelines, over a given plainchant *cantus firmus*, all the while remaining conscious of what the other artists are doing, in what medieval listeners “perceived as an almost mystical embodiment of a communion of souls” (104). Though she also invokes a striking range of other texts (especially Dante’s *Commedia*), the mythology of the *Ainulindale*, presenting singers who at first know only the part of the mind of Eru from which they themselves individually arise, then become more conscious of each other, and finally improvise harmoniously together on themes propounded by the Creator, provides Bertoglio particular opportunity to work out the implications of this musical analogy. Melkor’s disruption of that improvised harmony mythologizes the origin of evil as toxic individualism: “By following Melkor, his disciples become accompanists instead of polyphonists, while all the others are forced to stay silent in puzzlement or to shout in the attempt to silence him” (122). Notably, Bertoglio argues, Tolkien describes this disruption not as “dissonance” (an inherent part of harmony in which momentarily unpleasing intervals point forward to consonant resolution) but as “discord” (tones unconnected with the given harmonic structure); yet (in keeping with Augustinian principles) Eru is able to bring even this discord into harmony. The Music of the Ainur is, of course, not merely a concert but also a pattern for sub-creation, and, conversely, “Music, as the art of time, and as the art which demonstrates how dissonances can (and must) be part of harmony, is the perfect symbol for the redemption of the world, nourishing, as it does, our hope for the Great Music to come” (163).

I do have one theological quibble: Bertoglio at several points refers to the angels as sharing in divine eternity [e.g., “The angels, in Christian theology, are pure spirits who exist in God’s eternity,” 87; “The angels (in Christian terms) and the Ainur (in Tolkien’s legendarium) enjoy an eternal contemplation of the Godhead [...]”, 98]. There are historic examples of this usage, certainly: Bertoglio cites, for example, Jacques de Liège (96). However, true eternity—defined by Boethius as “the complete, simultaneous, and perfect possession of everlasting life” (*Consolation*, V, prose vi)—cannot be a property of a free creature, which is by definition subject to change, i.e., the change involved in making a choice. The Scholastics make a distinction that would, I think, be helpful here, by introducing the term *aevum*, “aeviternity,” of which Aquinas says:

[Angels] have an unchangeable being as regards their nature, with changeableness as regards choice; moreover they have changeableness of intelligence, of affections and of places in their own degree. Therefore these are measured by aeviternity which is a mean between eternity and time. *ST I^a q. 10 a. 5*

Possibly, the introduction of this particular terminology would create further problems, but it seems to me that *some* such refinement would help to clarify the discussion.

Such (admittedly fine) points aside, this is an insightful and important addition to the literature: it is to be highly recommended.

—John Wm. Houghton

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LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH: THEORIES AND APPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS—EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE. Michael J. Urick. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021. ISBN 9781800715288. £20.00

MICHAEL URICK'S *LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH* SETS OUT with a clear purpose: to explore effective leadership practices through popular culture and Tolkien's legendarium. Urick considers various aspects of leadership, exemplifying academically supported theories without the burden of academic jargon or terminology. This is, in principle, a useful concept and while it provides an interesting springboard for Tolkien scholars, Urick's work is problematic in its eager mixing of Tolkien's written work with film