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Book examines music's sacramental potential

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Book examines music's sacramental potential

To have a colleague — and kindred spirit — with the depth and breadth of talent, intellect, devotion and sensitivity as Albert Blackwell is a rare honor. For that colleague to teach in another discipline (Furman's Department of Religion) yet write so insightfully and accurately about issues of great musical complexity, especially in our day of sub-disciplines and sub-sub-disciplines, makes the honor even more precious.

Blackwell's new book, *The Sacred in Music* (Westminster John Knox Press), is a careful study of historical, theological, philosophical, musical, mathematical, mystical, acoustical, social and personal perspectives on the often discussed but seldom defined issue stated in the book's title. It is a significant and welcome addition to the field of serious inquiry into the nature of music's role in communicating the divine and in communing with the Divine.

Moving from an introduction which states that "Others besides myself have noted the relative neglect of music in the study of religion," Blackwell sets out to write ". . . a work of theological interpretation in a musical mode." The musical mode is well-defined and well-tuned by his engaging style and sharp, insightful comments, and it is enhanced by carefully chosen quotes from biblical and historical figures and from contemporary critics, philosophers and theologians.

Blackwell recognizes that creative tension exists between those musicians who believe that the performance of music speaks for itself and that verbalization in advocating its value actually diminishes its import, and those who feel compelled to explain every facet of the musical art. He speaks directly to this issue: "We might ask, Why speak of music at all? Why not let music speak for itself, with its own grammar and in its own vocabularies? My answer is that we speak of music precisely because verbal language is too inestimably important in articulating and interpreting our experiences. . . . We

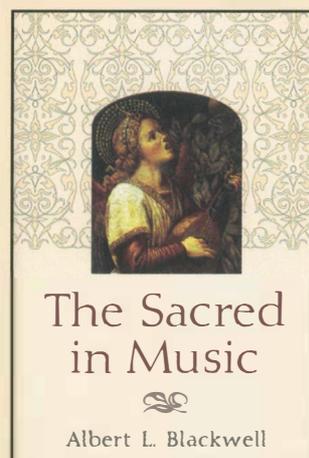
verbalize our musical experiences in the interest of fuller appreciation."

It is this sincere aim which dominates his study and which should provide comfort and support to the musical pilgrims who struggle with the issues of quality, taste and propriety in worship. In speaking of music's sacramental potential — the major theme of the book — Blackwell believes that "If we are to enjoy music's fullest sacramental potential, we must compose, play, sing and listen for reasons of musical value, as we must assemble, pray, praise, and live virtuously for reasons of religious value."

Blackwell puts the reader in touch with the thoughts and experiences of those who have grappled with these issues in their own times and places, quoting such seekers as St. Augustine, Aristotle, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Kandinsky, Schleiermacher and, happily, Simone Weil. Weil's statements, in particular, are stunning and challenging in their breadth of perception. Her thought-provoking idea of beauty as "the real presence of God in matter" and of experiencing beauty as "a sacrament in the full sense of the word" gives encouragement to those seeking divine revelation and communion through the arts.

Blackwell also examines how music has been perceived, used and misused throughout the history of the church. Indeed, music's mystical power to move the heart and mind is a truth that has been alternately embraced and feared by the church. Placed in the context of "The Fall," Blackwell's section on "Christian Ambivalence toward Music" brings the thoughts of Augustine into modern focus and explores a topic he calls "Music's Dark Resources," which includes a brief discourse on "grunge rock."

Though grounded in fact and reference, the book is not without opinion and passion. Especially appealing and revealing is Blackwell's confession, shared by many tradition-oriented church musicians, of his aversion to contemporary Christian music. He says, ". . . one of the most



distressing indications to me that I am part of a fallen world is the fact that among the music I most dislike is music that is most insistent in its claims to be Christian. Contemporary Christian music tries too hard to engender the feelings and convictions it harbours. (It) merely skims effects off more substantial music and more profound texts." He quickly cautions those whose heads are nodding in agreement of the "risk in such scornful opinions as these." And he warns that there is but a small degree of difference between righteous indignation and self-righteousness.

He also reveals his love for the music of Bach, Brahms and especially Mozart. In his "Codetta" he recounts the often quoted passage of Karl Barth in which Barth surmises that when the angels "are engaged in the praise of God," they play Bach. When they play for themselves they play Mozart, "and that then, indeed, the dear God listens to them with special pleasure."

I recommend *The Sacred in Music* to all who believe that intellect and inquiry ennoble and enhance the mystical and the holy, and especially to those church musicians who are committed to singing with spirit and understanding.

— William Thomas
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