



DIÁLOGO INTERCULTURAL E ECUMÊNICO ATRAVÉS DA ARTE

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**DIÁLOGO  
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## AN “*EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS FEELING*”: SOME NOTES IN MUSIC REPERTOIRE

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**Abstract:** This chapter aims to provide and reinforce the vital interconnection between music and religion. The authors highlight some of the moments, composers and works in which music is an expression of religious feeling. **Keywords:** Music; Religion; Music Composition.

The relationship between music and religion has always guided by proximity and prevalent influence. When we look through the history of music, there are many moments, composers and works where this connection takes a fundamental role. For Adorno (1982), it is critical to emphasize that the musical language constitutes by characteristics that give it a particular religiosity. Many composers treated this dialogue with great mastery and used religious themes as references for musical composition. Music is a vehicle of reproduction, symbolization and an attempt to divinity. For Andrews (1916), some of the greatest hits in music repertoire has marked by religious emotion. For example: *B minor Mass* of Bach, *Elijah* of Mendelssohn; *Messiah* of Handel; *Creation* of Haydn; *Requiem* of Mozart; *Ninth Symphony* of Beethoven with its choral conclusion, which though not religious can hardly call anything less, and also his *Missa Solemnis*. This connection has explored by other composers like Franz List (*Thirteenth Requiem*), Brahms (*German Requiem*), Edward Elgar (*Dream of Gerontius*) and César Franck (*The Beatitudes*).

This dialectical and dialogical link between music and religion is crosswise through the entire musical context. One of the composers where we can find a clear impact of the mysticism and transcendental experiences is the striking, virtuous and innovative name of the modern guitar Agustin Barrios Mangoré (1885-1944). His religious beliefs and mythology experiences play an essential role in his music and compositional process. For Stover (1992), Barrios religious beliefs were more theosophical. These convictions are clearly in the thoughts and opinions of Barrios about religion published by a Brazilian newspaper in the year 1931.

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In spite of a severe religious education, my primitive pantheism has pointed me in the direction of Theosophy, the most human and rational of philosophic concepts. I believe in the immutable laws of Nature. And Humanity and the Good impregnate my spirit as the ethical end of all existence (Barrios cit. Stover, 1992, p. 197).

Barrios was a storyteller and a painter of images. Through your guitar, he captured and crystallized the ritual traditions and mythology of Guaraní indigenous peoples (Ivannikov & Filatova, 2019). But at the same time (as romantic and humanist) he “intuitively recognized that there is a relationship between the good, the true and the beautiful and that all these realities are reflected in love towards life and one's fellow beings” (Stover, 1992, p. 198). The last composition *Una Limosna pelo Amor de Dios* is the reflection of his resignation to these truths. The technical and interpretative resources intrinsic to this work reveal the composer's aesthetic and musical maturity. One example of Barrios expression of religious feeling is the masterpiece of the repertoire of the classical guitar - *La Catedral* (1921). This work crosses the line between imitative and spiritual practices. For Ward (2010), this masterpiece is illustrative of his romantic imagination. This work is one of his most played and acclaimed compositions for guitar. It consists of three movements: *Andante Religioso*, *Allegro Solemne* and *Prelude Saudade*, which was written 19 years after the first two movements in Havana (Cuba), where an atmosphere where tranquillity predominates. The story goes that he based this piece on an experience he had at the Cathedral of San José, in Montevideo (Uruguay); the full horizontal chords of the *Andante Religioso* represent his impressions of the organist who plays Bach in the cathedral. For Chapman (2006), the rhythm and the chords that make up this movement give a sense of movement to musical progressions that evoke ancient traditions. The slow dotted rhythms represent characteristic of a funeral march and suggest *French Overture* style. Perhaps the users of this style are connected to the organist playing the music of Bach. When we look to the influence of Barrios (such Chopin or Beethoven) we can find these characteristics in this *Andante Religioso* (see Chopin *Marche Funèbre* from Sonata n.º 2, Op. 35 and *Marcia Funebre* in Symphony n.º 3 of Beethoven).

The overwhelming social changes in the 20th century brought a relevant corpus of religious music. The voice of *Moses* in the opening of Arnold Schoenberg massive opera *Moses and Aaron* “*Singular—eternal—omnipresent—unseeable and unimaginable God!*” represented and echoed the powerful meaning that religious texts and religious musical tradition became for the significant composers of the 20th century. The employed of the musical and textual vocabularies of ancient religious tradition is the reflection of the social changes (*e.g.* violence and war). In many compositions, there is an intention to adjust these vocabularies to the

modern world. The *War Requiem*, Op. 66 of Benjamin Britten (1962) is one of the examples. The centrality in these religious themes is curious, because many composers are not devout, and some of them are agnostic or atheist in their religious beliefs. One of the composers who never accepted a religious doctrine was the Hungarian-Austrian György Ligeti (1923-2006). However, in the mid-sixties, he wrote two religiously works with revealing impact, *Requiem* (1963-65) and *Lux aeterna* (1966). For the *Requiem* (two soloists, double chorus and orchestra). Ligeti “refracted and multiplied through the technique of micropolyphony” (Steinitz, 2003, p. 145) the work of Ockeghem, and in the *Lux aeterna* (sixteen solo voices) he use the text from a Roman Catholic Requiem Mass (*Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine, cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es. Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine; et lux perpetua luceat eis*). This two-piece features many of Ligeti characteristic styles. The individual voices in micropolyphonic that present create a transformation effect and an atmosphere of a subhuman howling (*Requiem*) or the character of hidden objects or dream landscapes (*Lux aeterna*), the cluster chords and the focus on timbre.

One composer with strong religious feeling is the French Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). For Ross (2007, p. 355), it “was left to Messiaen to write a religious work on a scale that no composer had attempted since Parsifal”. The *Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1965-69) and the sacred opera *Saint Francis of Assisi* (1975-83) are two good examples of the impact of religion in this composer.

The five-hour sacred opera *Saint Francis of Assisi*, which he began sketching in 1975 and finished in 1983, served not merely as a pageant in honor of the humble friar but as a kind of live-action reenactment of the very process of sanctification. *Parsifal* enclosed sacred ritual within a theatrical frame; Messiaen, by contrast, was enclosing theater within religion, creating a new genre of operatic meditation. In the process, he made extraordinary demands on his audience. Act II stretches on for two hours and ends with a forty-five-minute version of Francis’s sermon to the birds. Saint Francis harks back to those archaic liturgies in which spells of boredom give way to precisely staged epiphanies—as when, in the Greek Orthodox Easter service, the church goes dark and the light of a single candle remains. Messiaen wrote the libretto himself, elaborating the standard legends of Francis with theology out of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Almost nothing in the text would have come as a shock to an audience of thirteenth-century Loire Valley villagers. There are eight tableaux, each recording a stage in the life of the saint. Francis kisses a leper, encounters a musician angel, speaks to the birds, receives the stigmata, and dies in a state of suffering joy. He is sung by a dramatic baritone voice and comes across as a flesh-and-blood figure. He might be the haggard Francis as depicted in paintings by Caravaggio and Zurbarána youngish man gazing ravenously toward the heavens, his mouth hanging open, his hands wrapped around a skull. The central epiphany of the opera takes place in the fifth tableau, in which Francis meets the musician angel on the road. The episode is taken from Franciscan hagiography, according to which the friar once fainted after hearing an angel play a viol. He told his brethren, “If the Angel had played one more note-if, after down-bowing, it had made an up-bow-from unbearable sweetness my soul would have left my body.” In Messiaen’s version, the angel prefaces his concert with lines adapted from Aquinas: “God dazzles us by an

excess of truth. Music carries us to God in default of truth.” (Human reason, Aquinas wrote, is confounded equally by the elusiveness of poetic expression and by the superabundance of the Word of God.) The strings play a soft, unceasing C-major chord; over it, three ondes Martenot unwind a scarlet thread of melody that touches on ten of the twelve chromatic notes. The ears are teased by two textures—warm strings spreading out from the center, electronic tones pinging everywhere. In the space between them listeners can catch a glimpse of whatever they consider divine (Ross, 2007, pp. 354-355).

For Benitez (2019), the opera *Saint Francis* “is a synthesis of all that he [Messiaen] had done up that point in his career as composer” (p. 1). In fact, *Saint Francis* “is immense act of Faith in God”<sup>45</sup>. There is no doubt that the spirituality and faith marked the entire composition of Messiaen. Three months before his death, this French composer said that certain “people are annoyed that I believe in God. (...) But I want people to know that God is present in everything, in the concert hall, in the ocean, on a mountain, even on the underground” (Messiaen cit. in Ross, 2007, 355).

Another composer where the religious sources of inspiration assume an essential influence in his musical personality is the English composer Lennox Berkeley (1903 – 1989). During a radio talk in the year of 1990, Berkeley indicated some of the paths about his inspiration (Dickinson, 2003).

Music does not speak to the intellect alone. Its most important contact with the listener is of another order for it belongs first and foremost to the spiritual world and the best music is that which communicates the most strongly and the most urgently on that level.<sup>46</sup>

Many of his pupils confirmed this influence. For example, Malcolm Williamson (1991) puts Berkeley work on the same level as Palestrina. As a religious composer, Berkeley conceive his life “in no terms other than religious terms”. Another pupil, John Tavener (1973) felt that it is “impossible to manufacture true “devotional” music and it seems to me that Lennox Berkeley’s greatest music is his religious music” (p. 625). For Dickinson (2003), seems that the core of Berkeley is “music to religious texts both in the concert hall and increasingly in church” (p. 102). The two-vocal works “*Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila, Opus 27*” and the “*Stabat Mater, Opus 28*” are a good example of his core.

Two vocal works which he wrote in 1947 have long been considered as among his finest and most characteristic: the *Four Poems of St Teresa of Avila, Opus 27*, and the *Stabat Mater, Opus 28*. The Teresa of Avila songs were written first but the premiere – by Katheen Ferrier – was not until after that of the *Stabat Mater*. Both are the sacred works of a believer and it is not difficult to see why Berkeley found St Teresa of Avila (1515-82) an attractive subject. The Spanish saint and author was a member of the

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<sup>45</sup> Messiaen lecture in Conference at Kyoto on November 12 (1985).

<sup>46</sup> This Berkeley radio talk is included in R. Nichols, BBC Radio 3 interval talk: Sir Lennox Berkeley Memorial Concert, Aldeburgh Festival, 21 June 1990.

Carmelite sisterhood and an energetic reformer of the order who travelled around to found new convents. She was famous for mystical visions and apparently courted martyrdom by preaching to the Moors” (Dickinson, 2003, p. 102).

The use of oriental sounds, musical modes, concepts and other aesthetic and religious elements in the development and organization of instrumental textures, features the composition process of the second half of the 20th century. In 1960, Stockhausen voiced his impatience with the theology of musical moment (Harvey, 1975).

(...) forms of which an instant must not be a little bit of a temporal line, nor a moment a particle of measured duration, but in which the concentration on the Now – on every Now – makes as it were vertical sections which penetrate across a horizontal portrayal of time to a state of timelessness, which I call Eternity: an Eternity which does not begin at the end of time, but which is attainable in each moment (Stockhausen, 1964, p. 199).

Marked by this aesthetic approach we have *Madonna of Winter and Spring* (for orchestra, synthesizers and electronics), of the British composer Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012). This composition in honour of Mary (mother of Jesus) consists of four sections (Conflict, Descent, Depths and Mary) and represent through music the process of the transcendent state. A key figure in this practice of transformation and abandonment of all that is material is the female figure associated with the Christian religion (Mary). In Harvey, there is a clear parallel between his work and his spiritual development. For example, in *Smiling Immortal* (1977), we see the influence of Rudolf Steiner. In the opera *Passion and Resurrection* (1981) we can find Christian mystic (an interrelation of two divergent worlds, which complement each other) and in the *Advaya* (1994) the cult of Asian philosophies.

One crucial composer of the second half of the 20th century was the Estonian composer of classical and religious music Arvo Pärt. At the end of the sixties, Pärt turned to religious subjects.

In his 1968 cantata *Credo*, the words “Credo in Jesum Christum” are set to the tune of Bach’s *Prelude in C Major* and beset with aleatory bedlam. After that, for a period of eight years, Pärt composed little, immersing himself in a study of medieval and Renaissance polyphony. Then, in 1976, the year of Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians* and of Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*, Pärt reemerged with a stunningly simple piano piece titled *For Alina*, which consists of just two voices, one moving by melodic steps and the other rotating through the pitches of a B- minor triad. The following year he wrote a *Cantus* in memory of Benjamin Britten, whose music haunted him in ways he could not quite put into words. The technique of *Cantus* is like that of Reich’s phase-shifting music, with downward A-minor scales unfurling in different voices and at different speeds. In the two-violin concerto *Tabula Rasa*, also from 1977, Pärt goes from strict process to free expression; at the beginning of the second movement,

“Silentium,” a rustling arpeggio on a prepared piano, like the rustling of wings, ushers in icily beautiful chords of D minor. Both the invocation of silence and the use of a prepared piano acknowledge John Cage, who opened so many doors in colleagues’ minds (Ross, 2007, p. 398).

The inspiration in religious texts marks his later works (Pärt use Latin or Church Slavonic language used in Orthodox liturgy). Just take a look for some of the examples: (1) The *Berliner Messe* (originally scored do SATB soloists and organ); *St. John Passion* (for solo baritone, solo tenor, solo vocal quartet, choir, violin, oboe, cello, bassoon and organ); *Te Deum* (women’s choir, men’s choir, mixed choir, prepared piano, strings and wind harp); and the choral work *Magnificat* (for five-part choir SSATB a cappella). All this composition is written in *tintinnabuli*<sup>47</sup> style. For Hillier (1997) this last composition (*Magnificat*) “displays the tintinnabuli technique at its most supple and refined” (p. 185).

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, we have witnessed the natural proximity and connection of different Eastern and Western artistic philosophies and cultures. There are many examples in the music repertoire (e.g. Cage, Stockhausen, Murail, Pasiieczny) where dialogical and dialectical dialogue marks the entire process of musical composition. For instance, in the guitar composition *The Goi-Dai Concerto* (homage to Takemitsu), Pasiieczny (2015) use the Japanese philosophy of the “Five Great” elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and void/spirit). To reinforce some colouristic effects and linked to Takemitsu compositional style, Pasiieczny used the Japanese *Miyako-Bushi* scale.

For *The Go-Dai Concerto*, I was very much influenced by his ‘quasi’ concerto for five percussionists *From me flows what you call Time* (1992) where Takemitsu himself alluded to the Five Elements philosophy from the Tibetan Buddhism tradition<sup>24</sup>. Instead of copying his idea directly, I decided to make reference to him by combining three influences into one embodying concept i.e. the ‘Go Dai’ philosophy which encompasses (1) the notion of Japanese tradition; (2) points to the five elements; and (3) is connected to the philosophy of the Japanese Zen Garden (Pasiieczny, 2015, p. 11).

In all of these musical works and ancient religious tradition, the principle is simple. In essence, the music assumes as a vehicle of *expression of religious meanings and feeling* and the path for the transposition into mysticism and intellectual experiences.

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<sup>47</sup> Composition style invented for Pärt in the mid-1970s. This style is characterized by two types of voice: the first arpeggiates the tonic triad, and the second moves diatonically in stepwise motion (Hillier, 1997).

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