

BOOK REVIEW

Don E. Saliers. *Music and Theology*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007. xii + 83 pp. Pbk. US\$10.50.

The powerful relationship of music and the sacred has long been recognized. The Old Testament illustrates music's ability to enhance the praise of God (e.g., Ps 150); Paul recommended singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16); and Martin Luther wrote, "next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise" (*Liturgy and Hymns*, Luther's Works 53:323). Liturgical texts set to music are imbued with greater emotive and associational power than when they are merely spoken. But this age-old acknowledgement of music's profound role in religious experience has yielded surprisingly few accessible writings on the subject. For the most part, studies in religious music have been written by scholars for scholars, leaving general readers without a concise introduction to the theories of the field. And while it can be argued that sacred music is more apt for experience than discussion, there is much to be gained from a better understanding of this essential aid to prayer and praise.

Fortunately, Don E. Saliers, a senior scholar of theology and worship at Candler School of Theology, has written a brief and engaging primer addressing the major issues in worship, theology, and music. As an overview of scholarship and an introduction to Saliers' own thought, this book is everything it should be: readable yet substantive, concise yet comprehensive, broad yet detailed. The book's seven chapters address wide-ranging topics, including music and the body, the intersection of theology and songs of social justice, and the often-blurry line between what are typically called "sacred" and "secular" musical styles.

Saliers investigates a number of traditional and popular musical sources—from Bach to John Coltrane—building a case

that theology requires music. He notes that while the theologian's realm is language, the subject of theology is beyond words. Music, however, expresses the verbally inexpressible, helping to clarify spiritual truths that may seem overly complex or even far-fetched. As Sailers writes, "[we] are asked to say some things that we don't truly think we believe until we sing them, or hear them in appropriately complex activities" (p. 6). Elsewhere he explains that when "great theologians wish to speak of the deepest realities, they move toward poetry and music—heightened speech—as an attempt to 'sound' spiritual matters" (p. 72). But he also cautions that not all music inspires contemplation, functions theologically, or is appropriate for religious reflection. Musical settings of liturgy in particular must be true to the message and spirit of the words.

Of special interest is Saliers' lucid discussion of hymns (Ch. 4). Sacred songs are often characterized by simplicity and redundancy, qualities that make them ideal for religious messages. Especially in Christian hymn traditions, pithy verses convey theological viewpoints argued elsewhere, or emphasize religious themes such as praise, commitment, longing, and lament. By the careful partnership of music and words, an effective song can capture succinctly the essence of both religious ideas and the sacred moment, producing what Saliers calls a "theological miniature" (p. 36). And because hymns are hedged by the demands of unity and clarity, they serve an important didactic role.

The greatest strength of this book is that it is succinct without being superficial. However, the book's brevity led the publisher not to include an index, which would have enhanced the text. A list of suggested readings would also have been valuable, especially given Saliers' four decades as a teacher of theology and worship. Still, these would just be added bonuses for a book that is, in both content and style, perhaps the most useful general text on music and theology to date. Its intended readership is wide, from undergraduate and seminary students to interested laypeople, clergy, and church musicians, and its value is immense.

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