Music is often considered one of the most temporal—if not the most temporal—of the arts. Music unfolds in time and can only be experienced sequentially. Musical notation is an attempt to fix or capture that temporality, to render it graphically visual and reproducible. Yet, although we can take in a page of music at a single glance, we still need to hear or perform the piece in real time. Moreover, notated musics are a relatively small portion of all the musics that have existed or exist in the world today.

Although temporality and eternity are clearly not the same concepts, it is perhaps not surprising that creators of music have associated the two, since temporality extended can become eternity. Musicians have long sought to reflect ideas of eternity, both within the structural processes of music and in relation to the kinds of extra-musical ideas (such as texts and images) often associated with music.

In this brief essay, I will only deal with the Western art tradition, with which I am most familiar. The topic of music and eternity obviously calls for a cross-cultural, global approach, since these concepts are at play in other traditions. (A recent CD of Indian music is called “Eternity—The Soul of India.”) I will focus on five pieces created across two and a half centuries that I believe exemplify (but by no means exhaust) the ways composers have sought to
convey or at least engage with the idea of eternity in music. The composers are J.S. Bach, Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, Olivier Messiaen, and Philip Glass.

In the West, musical manifestations of eternity were initially linked with sacred music. It became customary in the Middle Ages—although the practice dates from ancient Jewish traditions—to end a Catholic rite or a chant with a phrase that became known as the Doxology. In Latin, the familiar text is “Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in sæcula sæculorum. Amen.” In English this is most often rendered as “Glory be to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. (The translations of “semper” as “ever shall be,” and “in saecula saeculorum” as “world without end,” date from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer of the sixteenth century.)

The Doxology has been sung in churches for well over a thousand years. But musical settings that seek specifically to capture its image of eternity are more recent. Perhaps the finest and most exciting is that of J.S. Bach, at the end of his Magnificat from 1723 (BWV 243). [Ex. 1 here] At the words “in saecula saeculorum” Bach’s five-part choir breaks into a polyphonic imitative style; successive voices take up the phrase and sustain a long note on the “-lo-” of “saeculorum.” Imitation of this kind (of which Bach was a master, including in his many fugues) is a splendid musical emblem of eternity, because the successive entrance of voices could in principle go on forever. In the final moments of the Magnificat, however, all five vocal parts, accompanied by a full orchestra including trumpets and drums, converge on the resonant final “Amen.”

In the Romantic period, especially in Germany, musical eternity became more secularized, tied to sensual and spiritual (though not necessarily Christian) longing. Nowhere is
this more apparent than in the epitome of German Romantic music, Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). Although Wagner based his work on a medieval romance, his infatuation with the work of Schopenhauer led him to filter the original love story of Tristan and Isolde through the philosopher’s concept of life as a cycle of frustration and unfulfillment that can only be released in death. In the famous love duet of Act II of *Tristan*, the lovers sing of being united in the eternal bliss of death:

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So starben wir,  Thus might we die,
um ungetrennt,   that together,
ewig einig    ever one,
ohne End',     without end,
ohn' Erwachen,  never waking,
ohn' Erbangen,  never fearing,
namenlos       namelessly
in Lieb' umfangen,  enveloped in love,
ganz uns selbst gegeben,  given up to each other,
der Liebe nur zu leben!
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The word “ewig” (“eternal” or “forever”) appears no fewer than a dozen times in the libretto for this scene.

In *Tristan* Wagner created a powerful musical language for the expression of infinite longing. Bach’s imitative polyphony would not work here. Rather, Wagner writes in a style that delays firm resolution and keeps moving forward, because it does not settle down into stable harmonies or on firm cadences. Wagner’s main device is the sequence, in which a melodic-harmonic phrase gets repeated successively at different pitch levels and (like Bach’s imitative polyphony) could in theory go on indefinitely. The musical phrase for the first two lines of the libretto is repeated a third higher for the second two lines. [Ex. 2 here] The fifth and sixth lines are also treated sequentially.

Composing some fifty years after Wagner’s *Tristan*, Gustav Mahler was strongly influenced by not only by Schopenhauer’s longing, but also by Nietzsche’s idea of the “eternal
return.” Mahler’s great symphonic song cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth, 1909) is a setting of ancient Chinese poems as rendered in German by Hans Bethge. The final song, called “Der Abschied” (The Farewell), ends with a long paean to the eternal renewal of nature:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Die liebe Erde allüberall</th>
<th>The dear earth everywhere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt</td>
<td>blooms in spring and grows green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aufs neu! Allüberall und ewig</td>
<td>afresh! Everywhere and eternally,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blauen licht die Fernen!</td>
<td>distant places have blue skies!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewig... ewig...</td>
<td>Eternally... eternally...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The way in which Mahler draws out and repeats the final word “ewig” is unprecedented in music. [Ex. 3 here] The voice’s two-note theme descends only to the note above the final tonic C, thus hovering without resolution. In the orchestra a harmonically ambiguous figure floats between the harps and a bell-like keyboard instrument, the celesta. Mahler closes with one of the most open-ended sounds available to him, a triad with a sixth added on top. There is no question this is Mahler’s attempt to convey a musical idea of eternity.

For the twentieth-century French master, Olivier Messiaen (1908-92), the concept of eternity was intimately bound up with both his Catholic religious faith and his love of nature. One of his most powerful compositions bears the notion of eternity both in its title, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time, 1941), and in its fifth movement, “Louange à l’Éternité de Jesus” (Praise to the Eternity of Jesus). Messiaen wrote the quartet for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano while a prisoner of war in a German camp during World War II.

The composition was inspired by a passage from the book of Revelation that included the text: “And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever and ever. . .that there should be time no longer” (Rev. 10:5-6). The tempo marking for the fifth movement of the quartet, probably unique in
music, is in a certain sense unachievable: “infiniment lent,” infinitely slowly. In his preface to
the score Messiaen writes that the theme “magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the
Word, powerful and gentle, ‘whose time never runs out.’”

Recent American music often characterized as “minimalist” comes closest among
modern styles to adumbrating eternity. This music unfolds by a process of gradual, incremental
change, and is as such very different from the more goal-oriented music of high modernism.
Philip Glass’s Two Pages from 1968, written for piano or electric keyboard, is a good example.
Glass directs that a simple melodic figure of five notes is to be repeated rapidly thirty-four times.

[Ex. 4 here] The figure is then modified by the addition of four more notes identical to the first
four notes. This expanded, nine-note figure is directed to be repeated eighteen times. This
figure is in turn expanded by three notes that are the first three notes of the original, and this
new figure is repeated fourteen times. And so forth. The musical process thus literally shapes
the composition; it is the “form.” As with some of the other music we have discussed, this
process could in principle continue infinitely, into eternity. In fact, it does not: the piece lasts
eighteen minutes.

Glass has remarked that for him music is like “an underground river,” one which is
constantly flowing and which he as a composer can choose to listen to and write down.¹ This
fascinating image or metaphor captures vividly the relationship of his music to an idea of eternal
flow. In some ways, Glass’s comment reminds us of an early Romantic notion of music as
articulated by E.T.A. Hoffmann (who adapted it from the physicist Johann Ritter): that music is
always around us in nature, and that composers hear these sounds as music, “first as individual
chords, then as melodies with harmonic accompaniment.”²
For many centuries, then, Western composers have been preoccupied ideas of eternity—in the realms of the secular or sacred, the physical or metaphysical, or the natural or supernatural. Bach’s kinetic polyphony, Wagner’s yearning sequences, Mahler’s delicate dissonance, Messiaen’s slow themes, and Glass’s processes of incremental change: these are just a few examples of how a great composer can adapt the musical language of his time to convey, within the finite space of a composition, a musical image of eternity.

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1 Glass makes this comment during an interview in the documentary *Glass: A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts*, dir. Scott Hicks (2007; DVD 2009).

EX. 1. Bach, Magnificat

EX. 2. Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, Act II, sc. 2

TRISTAN

So starben wir, um ungefährt, ewig ewig oh...ende!

EX. 3. Mahler, Das kied von der Große, "Der Abschied"

Alto

Gänzlich ersterbend

EX. 4. Glass, Two Pages