

## **Reflection: Music and Eternity**

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### **Walter Frisch**

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.

The topic of music and eternity calls for a cross-cultural, global approach, since these concepts are at play in many traditions. In this brief essay, I will deal only with Western art music, the tradition with which I am most familiar. 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 Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Handel, 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 saecula saeculorum. 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. Bach, *Magnificat*

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano I (S I), Soprano II (S II), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The music is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The lyrics are "et in saecula saeculorum". The Soprano I voice begins with a long note on the word "lo" of "saeculorum", which is then imitated by the other voices in sequence: Soprano II, Alto, Tenor, and finally Bass. This creates a polyphonic effect that emphasizes the word "lo" and the concept of eternity.

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.”

Bach’s contemporary Handel achieved a similar effect in the renowned “Halleljuah” Chorus from the oratorio *Messiah* (1742). The chorus breaks into four-part imitative polyphony at the words “And He shall reign for ever and ever,” which are taken from the Book of Revelation and likewise comprise a sacred reference to the concept of eternity. At the end of the number, as in Bach, voices and instruments come together in a blaze of D major: thus is eternal glory anticipated and celebrated.

In the Romantic period, especially in Germany, musical intimations of eternity became more somber and secularized. They are associated with a notion of longing that was sensual and spiritual, but not overtly Christian. Nowhere is this phenomenon 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:

So starben wir,  
um ungetrennt,  
ewig einig  
ohne End',  
ohn' Erwachen,  
ohn' Erbangen,  
namenlos  
in Lieb' umfangen,  
ganz uns selbst gegeben,  
der Liebe nur zu leben!

Thus might we die,  
that together,  
ever one,  
without end,  
never waking,  
never fearing,  
namelessly  
enveloped in love,  
given up to each other,  
to live only for love!

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. The imitative polyphony of Bach and Handel 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.



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:

Die liebe Erde allüberall  
Blüht auf im Lenz und grünt  
Aufs neu! Allüberall und ewig  
Blauen licht die Fernen!  
Ewig... ewig...

The dear earth everywhere  
blooms in spring and grows green  
afresh! Everywhere and eternally,  
distant places have blue skies!  
Eternally... eternally...

The way in which Mahler draws out and repeats the final word “ewig” is unprecedented in music.

Ex. 3. Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, “Der Abschied”

The musical score consists of four staves. The top staff is for the Alto voice, showing a long, sustained note 'ewig' with a 'PPP' dynamic marking. The second staff is for the Orchestra (Orch.), showing a complex, layered texture with a 'PP' dynamic marking. The third staff is for the Celesta, and the fourth staff is for the Harp, both providing harmonic support with sustained notes and arpeggiated figures. The tempo/mood is marked 'Gänzlich ersterbend'.

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, 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 (different from the one chosen by Handel’s librettist) 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 swore 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. Glass, *Two Pages*



The figure is then modified by the addition of four more notes identical to the first four notes. The expanded, nine-note figure is to be repeated eighteen times. This figure is in turn is expanded by three notes that comprise the first three notes of the original, and the 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.<sup>1</sup> This

fascinating image 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."<sup>2</sup>

For many centuries, then, Western composers have been preoccupied ideas of eternity—in the realms of the secular or sacred, the physical or metaphysical, the natural or supernatural. Bach's and Handel'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 instances 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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<sup>1</sup> Glass makes this comment during an interview in the documentary *Glass: A Portrait of Philip in Twelve Parts*, dir. Scott Hicks (2007; DVD 2009).

<sup>2</sup>E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Johannes Kreisler's Certificate of Apprenticeship," trans. Max Knight, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 5 (1982): 192.