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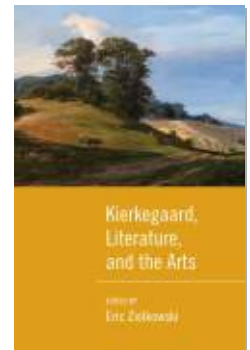
Published by Northwestern University Press

Ziolkowski, Eric & Garff, Joakim & Jøthen, Peder & Rovira, James.

Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

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Don Giovanni and *Moses and Aaron*

The Possibility of a Kierkegaardian Affirmation of Music

Peder Jothen

The double doors were opened; the effect of the brilliant lighting, the coolness that flowed toward them, the spicy fascination of the scent, and the tasteful table setting overwhelmed the entering guests for a moment, and when at the same time the orchestra began playing the dance music from *Don Giovanni*, the forms of those entering were transfigured, and as if in deference to an invisible spirit encompassing them, they stood still a moment, like someone whom admiration has awakened and who has risen in order to admire.

—“In Vino Veritas” (SKS 6:32 / SLW 27)

The relationship between music and religion within Western thought is, in general, an ambivalent one. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote, “When [hymns] are sung these sacred words stir my mind to greater religious fervour. . . . But I ought not to allow my mind to be paralysed by the gratification of my senses, which often leads it astray.”¹ Martin Luther, himself an Augustinian monk, viewed music as the second best means of revealing the gospel after preaching. Lutheran hymnody thus connected music with theological and biblical truth.² Though from different presuppositions, both thinkers yet understood music as a powerful artistic form that must be carefully restrained by the mind or linguistic forms of truth in order to be appropriate within Christianity.

I start this chapter on Søren Kierkegaard’s musical aesthetic by referencing Augustine and Luther because in many ways, Kierkegaard’s appreciation for and mistrust of music overlap Augustine’s and Luther’s musical ambivalence. On the one hand, Kierkegaard makes positive references to music in his journals, particularly in relation to Christian hymnody. On the other hand, notably through his pseudonym “A” in *Either/Or I*, he argues that the essence of music is sensuous and nontemporal and contradicts the permanence and repeatability of word-based, spiritual truth. Here, music has little to no place in the Christian life. But as such, like his theological ancestors, his musical aesthetic itself is thus deeply ambivalent.

This essay argues that there are two main reasons for this ambivalence. One, Kierkegaard, partially shaped by the Lutheran doctrine of *sola scriptura*, views the truths that matter for Christian selfhood as being biblically revealed and made intelligible through words. As with Luther before him, Kierkegaard's musical aesthetic then arises out of his primary concern about making Christian truth, most notably biblical truth, inwardly real for a hearer. Even in "A's" depiction of music as being merely sensuous, making the Word of God concrete is a latent presupposition. Second, Kierkegaard's critique is a component of one of the broader aims of his authorship, that of provoking his readers to a deep reflection about the form of one's selfhood. As such, rather than a sophisticated musical aesthetic, his musical critique establishes the basic contours of the aesthetic stage of existence, one exemplary type or form of selfhood. As "In Vino Veritas" relates, music has a power that can "transfigure" and lead people to admire the present moment rather than strive to become a Christian and truly hear Christian truth. His musical aesthetic is, then, less about music itself and more concerned with the role music plays in shaping desire, thought, and the overall form of one's life.

To clarify this argument, this essay makes two movements, each relating to these Kierkegaardian sensibilities. The first movement develops Kierkegaard's concept of music as an artistic genre. Famously, Kierkegaard's pseudonym "A" explores Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*.³ Writing as an aesthete, "A" describes music as uniting an aural, sensuous form with the existential content of natural passion. Music is then a means of communication, one that unveils sensuous, abstract immediacy to a listener rather than any clear, understandable truth. Yet, within his journals, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of music, in particular hymns, as being valuable for his own faith life when framed by the gospel and thus connected to the Christian form of life. Here, music is an ally for communicating Christian truth and thereby helpful to a listener developing a Christian self-consciousness.

The second movement uses Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses and Aaron* (*Moses und Aron*, first performed in the 1950s)⁴ in comparison with "A's" critique of *Don Giovanni* to elucidate this ambivalence. Subverting the harmonic tradition of someone like Mozart, Schoenberg's opera uses a wide variety of nontraditional musical techniques such as *Sprechstimme* (literally, "spoken-voice") and dissonance to create an opera in which no word-based or idea of truth is ever clear or stable, whether in thought, word, or deed. In short, Schoenberg does not view human language as being able to articulate the mystery that is the divine. Both music and words fail in this task, and his opera thereby reveals the negation of words as able to contain essential truths about human existence. Thus, any certainty about a life built out of the knowledge of God is ever unstable.

The value of this comparison for understanding Kierkegaard's musical aesthetic is threefold. First, Schoenberg's playful, creative, and genre-bending use of music reveals the limited notion of the genre of music that Kierkegaard

uses, notably in *Either/Or I*. Second, “A’s” critique is valuable more as a treatment of the aesthetic stage than as a musical aesthetic. Third, this comparison also supports the claim that even amid the presentation of “A’s” decidedly critical view of music, Kierkegaard affirms his *sola scriptura* roots. Unlike Schoenberg’s negation of the power of words to contain ultimate truth, “A’s” critique of music implicitly expresses Kierkegaard’s trust of the foundational basis for Christian existence, the Bible. When rooted in divinely given words, human language concretizes truth. And when paired with music, these words can shape one’s Christian existence, the central thrust of Kierkegaard’s authorship.

Movement One: Kierkegaard, *Don Giovanni*, and Music

Kierkegaard never strove for a systematic aesthetic, meaning his conception of music expresses a jumble of attitudes about the value and purpose of music within human existence. Yet he is consistent in giving music several important characteristics. For one, in his journals, Kierkegaard relates how music can affect his emotional state. Humans are passionate beings, and music speaks to this dimension of human existence. For instance, in an entry of August 25, 1836, he writes of the romance of hearing street music: “Why is hand organ music so often appealing? It is no doubt because of the romantic involved [*sic*] in the mode of its appearance. It is, so to speak, a kind of poetry on the street corner. One does not expect music at all, and suddenly [the organist] begins to play” (SKS 27:144, Papir 175 / JP 3:3812). Music as “romantic” here relates to human emotions and sensuality; a listener experiences a surprising shift in mood in response to the appealing scene that music creates on the street. Music has a transformative power on human mood. It speaks to human passion and desire.

And it is possible for this affective power to be tethered to existential content. In particular, Kierkegaard shows an affinity for the power of hymnody. For instance, in 1850, he writes, “The 8th of September! The gospel: No one can serve two masters (my beloved gospel)! My favorite hymn: ‘Commit Thy Way’ [a German hymn by Paul Gerhardt, no. 42 in *Roskilde-Konvents Psalm-ebog*], which Kofoed-Hansen [the curate at Frelsers Church] chose today!” (SKS 23:478, NB20:160 / KJN 7:486). By implication, music, when it accompanies words, serves an important function for Kierkegaard: it can relay Christian truth to a hearer. As it did for Luther, in hymnody, human thinking about existence, grounded in words given by God, allies with music’s power to affect passion and desire as a result.

The broader point here is that in both instances, Kierkegaard affirms the experiential relevance and vitality of music in human existence. On the one hand, music has a transformative power that alters one’s mood; it affects desires and passions. On the other, and in relation to his own faith, music can

actually help him to “hear” the gospel better. This connection between words and music, as well as between thought and passion, is thus vital to the role that Kierkegaard creates for music within the Christian life.

Yet, though Kierkegaard offers such a space for music in his own life, his pseudonym “A’s” development of music as a sensuous, erotic, abstract, and immediate artistic medium in “The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic” sees music as a distraction from leading an examined, intentional life.⁵ Masked by his pseudonym, he provocatively develops the basic structure of the Kierkegaardian suspicion of music in the Christian life: music is the “demonic” and thus moves one away from Christian becoming. With this idea of becoming, I suggest, Kierkegaard stresses a view of human existence in which one’s moral, religious, psychological, and intellectual formation is a lifelong process. His authorship thus seeks to provoke his readers to the recognition that one is never a fully integrated, true self but is always in process toward this end. Such a form or shape of selfhood is the highest task for a person, and Christianity offers each individual the means to rightly orient one’s becoming toward the true, divinely given vision of human existence.

Indeed, the essential nature of music is the opposite of the spirit of Christianity, even though Christianity, ironically, divorced music from spiritual experience. Whereas in ancient Greece, music was harmoniously intertwined with sensuality and spirituality within religious expression, in Hegelian fashion, “A” argues that Christianity postulated sensuality, with music as the proper medium for its expression, as separate from spirituality. This separation establishes the concept of the spiritual, the opposite of the sensual. The spiritual has its roots in words and also makes music into essentially a sensuous mode of expression, for “A” stresses how it overwhelms words. In this positing, Christianity excludes music “from itself” as the means to emphasize God’s Word as the source of spiritual truth (*SKS* 2:71 / *EO* 1:64). Foundational to this argument, music conceptually unites a sensuous form with erotic content, expresses abstract immediacy, and cannot communicate word-based truth concretely. It is this conception of music that serves as the primary locus for developing Kierkegaard’s musical aesthetic, for it affirms the general outline of Kierkegaard’s own view: music can be an ally to Christian selfhood when intertwined with word-based, Christian truth. Yet, without such a frame, music pulls a listener away from Christian existence.

Form and Content

As David Gouwens succinctly puts it, “Mozart, supremely in *Don Giovanni*, achieves a perfect union of form and content, wherein absolutely musical subject matter (the Don Juan myth) is united with the absolutely musical form that reflects it.”⁶ This perfect permeation of form and content makes certain types of artistic endeavors “classic,” unable to be copied. And “A” views Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* as such a musical work.⁷ “The subject matter

permeates the form and also . . . the form permeates the subject matter—this mutual permeation, this like-for-like in the immortal friendship of the classic” makes a work like Mozart’s inimitable (SKS 2:60 / EO 1:52–53). This form and content “permeation” makes this opera a classic.

Music’s form is aural sensuality. “A” argues that music is prereflective and that it uses the immediate, natural sense world as its structure. “Music always expresses the immediate in its immediacy” (SKS 2:76 / EO 1:70). It is momentary, alive only in the immediate present, full of sensuous energy that then lacks a past and has no future; it is nonrepeatable as such. This mere presentness means that it has a temporal indeterminacy, for only by having a past and a future does an artwork have a history, a trail of a legacy that lasts and a future that engenders a responsibility for its continued aliveness.

With this formal power, “A” affirms, Mozart’s music is the sensual artifact par excellence. *Don Giovanni* unveils sensuality through time and sound. Because music is performed and heard, music has its own time: different performances perform the music at a particular point in time and may use different tempos, rhythms, and so forth. Music has meter and rhythm that structure sound temporally. “Music does not exist except in the moment it is performed, for even if a person can read notes ever so well and has an ever so vivid imagination, he still cannot deny that only in a figurative sense does music exist when it is being read” (SKS 2:75 / EO 1:68). But music expresses time only metaphorically as it does not take place within the strict demands of a set, ordered, clock-based chronological time; it plays with time rather than follows the strict demands of the human experience of the endless tick-tock of temporality. Music also is directed at the ear, the most sensuous of the sense organs. As heard, music, and in particular *Don Giovanni*, creates a sensual tickle within the ear as the most sensible of the human ways of perceiving.

Don Giovanni unites this sensual form with a similar content: the Don’s story of seduction and erotic love. It is an existential content, as Don Giovanni’s life exemplifies a natural power: erotic desire is what gives him life and vitality. He is unconcerned about both his past (i.e., a history that makes him guilty for his actions) and a future (i.e., being responsible for his present actions); he lives merely in the immediate present, guided by his never-ending desire for erotic conquest: “It is the energy of desire, the energy of sensuousness of desire” (SKS 2:103 / EO 1:100). This power can be expressed only by music: “This power in Don Giovanni, this omnipotence, this life, only music can express, and I know no other predicate to describe it than: it is exuberant gaiety” (SKS 2:105 / EO 1:101).

“A” provides examples of the development of sensuous desire. The Page in *Figaro* exemplifies the first level. The Page’s desire lacks any clarity about its own desire; a dream-like consciousness, it flits about rather than intentionally focusing upon an object to possess. “Desire possesses what will become the object of its desire but possesses it without having desired it and thus does

not possess it” (*SKS* 2:81 / *EO* 1:75–76). Papageno in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* exemplifies the second level. Desire in this case leads a self to intend toward an object. As “A” puts it, “This awakening in which desire awakens, this jolt, separates desire and its object, gives desire an object” (*SKS* 2:85 / *EO* 1:79). But in the process, one recognizes not one object to desire but rather a multitude of things to desire in the world.

Don Giovanni exemplifies the third and highest level. Natural, innate desire rules his life, and he fully desires an object in its particularity. Desire, rather than self-reflective thought, is the principle of action, the power that moves him to act. He then is a “downright seducer,” a person who acts in the world through sensual love, a form of love that essentially is “totally faithless; it loves not one but all—that is, it seduces all. It is indeed only in the moment” (*SKS* 2:98 / *EO* 1:94). The Don expresses natural, unrestrained erotic passion that can never commit to loving one particular person. Such passion is amoral, as it is unaware of any ethical axioms because any awareness of moral codes would negate the vitality and power of desire. It cares only about the immediate present and nothing about the consequences of past acts or future possibilities. And being sensual, a passion for things in the world rather than spiritual love and the love of the unseen, it can never be oriented toward God, as such an orientation would negate its immediate, amoral character.

Mozart’s opera, through its musical form, instantiates as its existential content the Don’s eroticism. “In elemental sensuous-erotic originality, music has its absolute theme” (*SKS* 2:71 / *EO* 1:65).⁸ This opera, in its originality, is the perfection of the sensuous union between form and content, making it “demonic.” As Sylvia Walsh notes, “It is ‘demonic,’ being a medium for the expression of that which lies outside the realm of spirit.”⁹ It is demonic not in the sense of revealing demons but rather in the sense of being the opposite of the spiritual life of Christianity. Where Christianity calls one to hear and live by the Word of God, the language of the spirit, music calls one to hear and live by sensuous desire, natural inclinations, and unreflective immediacy. And it is this demonic calling that *Don Giovanni* perfects.

Idea Mediation

Another essential feature of “A’s” musical critique is how well music mediates or expresses ideas. He thus develops music as a type of language. For “A,” language has two distinct forms: of words and of nonwords. A language of words expresses ideas, or as “A” calls it, “reflection,” in space and time: words, systematized into a language, determinately express ideas clearly and intelligibly. “A” calls this quality of determinacy “concretization.” Nonverbal languages include music, which can “legitimately [be] called a language,” as they also express ideas in the temporal sphere (*SKS* 2:73 / *EO* 1:67). Yet it is only words that can clearly articulate spiritual and existential ideas because

word-based “language, regarded as medium, is the medium absolutely qualified by spirit, and it is therefore the authentic medium of the idea” (SKS 2:73 / EO 1:67). In short, in heavily Hegelian terms, “A” argues that words authentically mediate spiritual truth.¹⁰ However, music revels in sensuality, which dissipates when faced with reflection and cognition. It thus lacks the formal ability to express ideas clearly; sensuality always saturates words within its own presentness, overwhelming their power to reveal any clear idea.

Underneath this view lies the conceptual distinction between abstraction and concretion. To make something “concrete” is to determine its meaning clearly. It is to make X be understood as meaning X within time (as past-present-future), space, and the human senses. And as concrete, the idea can be repeated, as “the more concrete and thus the richer the idea and likewise the medium, the greater the possibility of a repetition” (SKS 2:62 / EO 1:54). In its repeatability, a self becomes responsible for appropriating the idea; an intelligible idea accordingly expresses existential truth as understandable, one that can determine how one exists. So, like Hegel, “A” esteems word-based language as the most spiritually valuable medium as it states the idea most intelligibly.¹¹

However, musical language, as typified by *Don Giovanni*, can express abstract ideas only in a prereflective, immediate language. “Reflection is fatal to the immediate,” meaning, “in other words, the immediate is the indeterminate” (SKS 2:76 / EO 1:70). In its ability to convey energy, vitality, and natural desire, music itself is what it mediates: eros. Being demonic, it is itself abstract, immediate, desirous energy that bubbles forth for a listener rather than any concrete, repeatable, and intelligible spiritual truth. Although there are other types of truths that music may express, “this is its absolute theme” (SKS 2:77 / EO 1:71). Sensuous desire is the highest, truest form of music, which *Don Giovanni* instantiates as both its form and content.

Consequently, even in “A’s” affirmation of sensuous music lies a presupposition about the primacy for words for clarity about one’s existence. Words make ideas concrete; music only reveals abstraction. This point pushes us to recognize that at play in Kierkegaard’s thought is the Lutheran theological pillar of *sola scriptura* as the determining mark for both theological and existential thinking. In Kierkegaard’s wider authorship, especially his period of direct communication (1848–51), several of his texts detail the existential relevance of the Bible. For instance, *For Self-Examination* (1851) states that like a love letter from a beloved, “God’s Word is just as precious to you as this letter is to the lover” (SKS 13:54 / FSE 26). We also see this in his affirmation of hymnody in his journals. Words matter, and not just any words, as “The Seducer’s Diary” in *Either/Or I* demonstrates; instead, only God’s love letter reveals the words that truly matter for existence.

Ever underneath “A’s” aesthetic lies Kierkegaard’s stress on the absolute need for clarity about the sinful yet saintly existence of being human, a clarity possible only through the Bible. Indeed, in his journals, he criticizes biblical

scholarship: “We have invented scholarship in order to evade doing God’s will. This much we certainly do understand—that face to face with God and his obviously understood will to say ‘This I will not do’—this no one dares to do. We do not dare do it that way, so we protect ourselves by making it seem as if it were very difficult to understand and that therefore we—he must indeed be flattered by this and regard it as praiseworthy in us—study and investigate etc., that is, we protect ourselves by hiding behind big books” (SKS 27:620, Papir 490, n.d. 1854 / JP 3:3597). Words matter for who we are to become, specifically words of Christian truth.

Existence-Communication

As the perfect union of sensuous form and erotic content amid the mediation of abstract immediacy, “A’s” musical aesthetic reveals to listeners a conception of existence in which ethical responsibility, moral reflection, and theological truth play no part. “A’s” critique plays a part in the notion of “existence-communication” that Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus develops in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (SKS 7:74–84 / CUP 70–85). Throughout his authorship, his dominant concern is to provoke each person to care about the ethical form and content of his or her life.¹² In short, what makes a person act? What does one love? What does one imagine being a “good” self might be?

“A,” and *Either/Or I* as a whole, thus are vital for Kierkegaard’s indirect communication of the aesthetic stage of existence. The aesthetic stage is a concept (along with the ethical and religious stages) that provides a heuristic device for a reader to reflect on the values, actions, and relations that make the reader a particular person. An aesthete is someone who is unconcerned with ethical codes and a life of faith. One lives for worldly beauty; one fears boredom, critical thought, and ethical responsibility. And music, as “A” develops it, communicates this model of existence.

As an aesthete, “A” seduces a reader into two understandings about music, both of which indirectly ask one to examine the values, commitments, and relationship within one’s form of life. First, “A” describes how Don Giovanni enacts a musical seduction within the opera itself. Music, as the highest mode of immediacy, is the stage for an operatic example of erotic seduction between the characters. The music itself here exemplifies unexamined, natural desire. “A’s” underlying impulse is that any listener will be captivated and become an “admirer” of the Don’s life, as Kierkegaard states in “In Vino Veritas.” Being accessible to anyone, “A” erotically seduces one into inhabiting the world of this sensual-erotic opera.

As a consequence, “A” seduces readers into the Don’s existence. He strives to have readers connect their passion with the Don’s musical desire that imaginatively asks them to fall in love with the erotic shape of the Don’s way of life. “A” celebrates such sensuality and immediacy. He wants readers to

imagine existing through natural passion and the vitality of sensuous desire, a form of life modeled by the Don.

“A” thus plays a vital role in developing the archetypal shape of the aesthetic stage within the Kierkegaardian corpus by presenting this erotic Don, ever ignorant of developing an ethical or faithful self-consciousness. And this existential seduction suggests that “A’s” ironic concern is that someone listening to *Don Giovanni* might then realize the emptiness and abstract nature of the sensuous-erotic. Though seemingly exhilarating, erotic desire is neither repeatable nor peaceful, for sensuality has an endless supply of things to desire. There is always another Zerlina around the corner. Like musical immediacy, the Don lacks any self-integrity as he lives merely in the present moment; his desire causes him constantly to flit from one object and relationship to another. “A’s” ironic aim in this musical seduction is to leave the reader wanting more, especially of a type of life in which the emptiness and endless nature of desire is reshaped (or “qualified,” in “A’s” words) to desire true, spiritual things.

The vacuity of “A’s” depiction of the Don’s life calls upon the reader to desire a more reflective, responsible life. One particularly relevant example is the ethical life developed in, among other places, Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or II*, written under the pseudonym Judge William. Indeed, “A’s” argument is not a solitary critique but rather part of an either/or choice related to the existence stages: either the Don’s aesthetic life or the Judge’s ethical life. “A” thus links the lower, sensual life with ethical life by creating a musical juxtaposition between spirit and sensuality by arguing that music’s sensuality is always qualified, always intertwined with spirit. As posited by Christianity, sensuality is always connected to the spiritual; as a body and a spirit, one is ever amid a both/and rather than an either/or (as in either a natural body or an infinite spirit). “That is, it is qualified by spirit and therefore is power, life, movement, continual unrest, continual succession. But this unrest, this succession, does not enrich it; it continually remains the same; it does not unfold but incessantly rushes forward as if in a single breath” (SKS 2:77 / EO 1:71). A listener of *Don Giovanni* hears the erotic amid a complexity of relations, and in particular between sensuality and spirituality. There is no pure sensuality as such, as even music is infused with spirit.

Yet, by implication, to hear music in the right manner requires that a listener intentionally respond to music as an existential either/or: *either* it is mere sensuality, imaginatively snatching the listener away from ethical responsibility (and into the aesthetic stage of life) *or* it is both sensuous and spiritual, requiring the listener’s consciousness to “qualify” it as an existentially formative experience (and thereby to be snatched into the ethical and religious stages). When placed in this existential frame, the choice “A” presents is not *either* music *or* not-music but rather a call for the listener to hear music rightly, notably its sensuous elements, as ever intertwined with spirituality. As such, hearing rightly means hearing it as ennobling a passion for the

world, becoming ethical, and affirming spiritual truth (as in rightly knowing God). But hearing it wrongly means accepting the consequences of living a life like the Don's.

Consequently, "A's" musicality overlaps with the existential either/or that Kierkegaard enacts between the two types of existence forms exemplified by the Don and the Judge. Reading *Either/Or I* is ever juxtaposed to the form of life offered by William in *Either/Or II*; the aesthete "A" is ever in conversation with William. To best understand the outlines of "A's" argument, one must read William's life, and vice versa. Through "A's" erotic seduction, Kierkegaard is thus challenging readers to a deeper consciousness about how one lives as he uses the mask of "A" to ironically affirm the sensuous-erotic life.

This view gains depth when understood in relation to several other caveats to "A's" critique. For one, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was widely adapted and altered during Kierkegaard's lifetime. Compared to the premiere in Prague in 1787, the opera Kierkegaard heard most likely had a number of modifications. Elisabete de Sousa observes, "Besides adding dramatic material borrowed from Molière, [translator Laurids Kruse] not only suppressed all recitatives in favor of spoken dialogue, but altered the structural development of the scenes and omitted the *scene ultima*, the whole following the structural pattern of the *Singspiel*."¹³ The omission of the *scene ultima* is particularly significant for "A's" view. The final scene follows the Don's fiery death and descent to hell as a result of his lack of repentance. Here, the characters sing about the consequences of sinful actions with lines such as "This is the end which befalls evildoers. And in this life scoundrels always receive their just deserts!"¹⁴ Kruse likely omitted these scenes because he "disapproved of the use of recitatives and looked suspiciously on opera as a dramatic genre, on ethical and on aesthetical grounds."¹⁵ Had this scene been included, "A's" argument that *Don Giovanni* reveals only sensuous desire would have been more difficult to support, to say the least, what with the ethical ending.

Additionally, Kierkegaard admits the possibility that the music could have been different. Two years before the publication of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard writes in his journals, "Precisely because he has been presented musically, D. Giovanni's natural genius has clearly been accentuated; if one so wished, one could present a more reflective D.G. by way of recourse to the arbitrary, thus [*sic*] he seduces a girl not because he finds himself at all affected by her, but she awakens a pleasant memory; as a pastime he will see if it can be made real; or she arouses a pleasant memory,—[which will] always remain beyond his grasp" (*SKS* 19:238, *Notesbog* 8:41, n.d. 1841 / *KJN* 3:232). This entry implies that there could have been a more reflective, thoughtful Don; the Don could have been less erotic. But by implication, "A's" suggestion that music is essentially sensual is a false claim, a possibility that Kierkegaard does incorporate into "A's" argument, however.

Consequently, "A" writes as an aesthete in order to develop an aesthetic form of existence: the unreflective life, a life lived through natural passion

and erotic desire, a life ungrounded in the spiritual. Developing a clear musical aesthetic is thus not the primary concern. Placed alongside *Either/Or II* and the ethical deliberations of Judge William, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is the means to help readers think about how they live their lives. His view brilliantly captures in words, ironically, the sensuous and aural beauty of Mozart, but largely with an aim of moving readers into a deeper engagement with ways of being in the world. Music can then become a component of an examined life rather than just a part of life caused by the admiration and affirmation of sensuous desire.

Movement Two: Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*

Yet, despite these deeper presuppositions, "A's" development of an opposition between musical sensuality and the spiritual is frequently taken as reflecting Kierkegaard's view. For instance, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that Kierkegaard, as well as Karl Barth, "warn us against overstepping the established boundaries [of music], saying that, if we attempt this nonetheless, we are doomed either to naïve banalities or to irrelevant abstractions."¹⁶ As a result, prima facie, "A's" musical aesthetic challenges any clear affirmation of the inclusion of music within the Christian life.

Such views read Kierkegaard as using "A" to develop a musical aesthetic rather than primarily as the means to communicate one model of existence. One means by which to deepen this argument is to compare "A's" argument with another musical frame of reference. Doing so enables Kierkegaard's affirmation of the power of words to contain truth, a claim at the heart of "A's" negative critique of music as well as exemplified in his journals, to emerge more clearly. It can also then reveal the polemical yet limited idea of the nature of music that Kierkegaard works through "A" to present a model of an aesthetic existence. Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* is one such musical work.

Why? For one, both *Don Giovanni* and *Moses and Aaron* are operas and therefore have a connection to human words and thought as well as music. For another, both works develop their insights by focusing on the communicative power of music, especially about the effectiveness of music in clarifying word-based ideas. Finally, both see human desire as part of the content expressed in and moved by music. Yet, where this comparison is most fruitful is in the underlying concept of music. Whereas "A" sees in *Don Giovanni* the perfection of the sensual-erotic that is the essence of music, Schoenberg crafts *Moses and Aaron* to destabilize the power of words to mediate truth. Both then, though in different ways, relate to ideas about the nature of theological and ethical claims; "A" offers a playful exploration of *Don Giovanni* that is framed by Kierkegaard's work to upbuild his readers, while *Moses and Aaron* toys with the inability to articulate God and the

difficulties inherent in living out such a reality. This comparison suggests that “A’s” argumentative presuppositions, alongside Kierkegaard’s appreciation of hymnody, can give further impetus to opening a space for a positive role for music to play in Christian becoming within his thought.

Schoenberg composed *Moses and Aaron* between 1930 and 1932. It has three acts, only loosely based on Exodus, as little attention is given to the liberation of the Israelites. Though ethnically Jewish, Schoenberg was a convert to Protestantism, so his source text was the Lutheran Bible rather than the Buber-Rosenzweig German translation of the Hebrew Bible. In the first act, God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, with Aaron as his tongue.¹⁷ Moses lacks the conviction that he can truly speak for the “one, infinite, omnipresent, unperceived and unrepresentable God,” the true liberator.¹⁸ The second act details Moses’s reception of the Ten Commandments as Aaron sets up a golden calf for the restless Israelites, ever desiring a visible symbol of God. The third act, for which the music was never completed, depicts a trial scene where Moses judges Aaron for his idolatry.

The primary theme of the opera is the impossibility of representing the divine in thought, word, or material object. By implication, one made most clearly in the depiction of Moses’s view of the Ten Commandments as being an idol, visions of a life grounded in claims about God are also problematic. The opera instantiates this view by having Moses refuse to see in words the power to name God’s being, whereas Aaron fluently uses language and external things to represent God. Doing so, as Bluma Goldstein puts it, means that “the opera attempted to resolve the communicative dilemma of language—of word, image, symbol—to transmit the idea” of God as unrepresentable.¹⁹ Connecting the conceptual categories used in the previous section to *Moses and Aaron* shows that the opera unites a dissonant aural form with the human desire for, yet the impossibility to clarify, God’s nature as the opera’s content. The opera thus mediates the attempt to represent God within the finite as both an internal and an external struggle for humanity.

Form and Content

As in *Don Giovanni*, commentators note the perfection of form and content in *Moses and Aaron*. Adorno states, “The a priori impossibility of sacred art today and the problematic nature of skill regarded as something that aspires to perfection form a perfect fit in the *Moses* opera.”²⁰ At the root of this perfection is a critique of sensuality; Schoenberg sought to free the musical form from an overemphasis on sensual harmony. He developed an “atonal” method of composition, known as serialism or twelve-tone music. Unlike the sensual, erotic harmonies and the “exuberant gaiety” of Mozart, the music is atonal and sparse. “The opera begins with a series of notes that express God’s presence at the scene of the burning bush,” observes Lora Batnitzky. “These opening notes are the only text-expressive idea or theme dominating the

opera. However, with the communication of God's self to Moses, the notes begin to sound distorted."²¹ At the formal level, Schoenberg de-sensualizes music such that it no longer has the sensual power that "A" finds so moving in *Don Giovanni*.

For instance, traditional operatic form requires that the libretto be sung, thereby intertwining the music and words. Yet, Schoenberg deconstructs this formal relationship by contrasting words that are sung with words that are spoken. Whereas Aaron sings, Moses speaks his own part in the manner known as *Sprechstimme*. In Elliot Gyger's words, "Within the norms of the operatic world, someone who speaks rather than singing is dealing with a great handicap, unable to communicate in a 'normal' way with the other characters."²² Aaron, as the singer, is the idolater, believing that operatic words, the "normal" operatic form of expression, can concretely represent God. Schoenberg is playing with the musical form such that it breaks down because it itself has become an idol, a rigid, established set of formulaic rules.

But as such, unlike "A's" view that music is about sensual harmony and erotic desire, *Moses and Aaron's* orchestration uses abrasive instruments and orchestration to assault the senses. For example, in the second act's orgy scene, the orchestration moves from relatively quiet strings to an agitated drum- and brass-filled explosion of wild drunkenness. The scene has no tonal, harmonic center, and like its subject material, the overall musical effect is itself of desire gone haywire, lost. Ironically, this scene would work well with "A's" linkage of music with the aesthetic stage, for it is a desire for human bodies and sensual pleasure.

Working with this thematic, Schoenberg presents humans as being desirous creatures, and, in particular, the opera suggests that they fundamentally have a desire for clarity about the nature of God. To repeat an expression from more than one earlier quotation, this is the "absolute theme" of the opera, and thus its existential content. So whereas "A" views music as an erotic power, thereby linking sensuous form with an ethical content rooted in natural passion, Schoenberg connects music's sensuous form with a negative content: the human desire for, yet the impossibility of, the articulation of a decisive foundation to know God and a life rooted in this truth.

Idea Mediation

But as a result, Schoenberg's work suggests the impossibility of concretizing truth, whether linguistically or mentally. For instance, within the libretto, which Schoenberg composed, this impossibility is enacted in the dialogue between Moses and Aaron. Whereas Moses desires but is unable to speak or to find sensual expression of the divine, Aaron speaks in order to find a sensual image. Indeed, Moses eventually destroys the tablets of the moral law after he realizes that they too are idolatrous, full of finite, vague words; even ethical ideals are unstable. The climax of the opera is at the end of act

2, when Moses says, “O word, thou word, that I lack” (MA 60). This utterance is in reaction to Aaron’s claim, amid the creation of the golden calf, that no one can “worship what one dare not even represent” (MA 27). Any human expression of God, and the existential ideals rooted in knowledge of the divine, is thus abstract, only a partial truth at best. Any attempt even at delimiting a representation of God fails, what with the finite, limited nature of human speaking and thinking.

Schoenberg’s musical orchestration mediates this perspective. For example, in act 1, scene 1, Moses sees God as the burning bush, but says, “My tongue is not flexible: thought is easy; speech is laborious” (MA 25). Although Moses finds thinking “easy,” one commentator even argues that all of Moses’s lines are actually thoughts and that, in the end, his thoughts shade into the realm of idolatry and impossibility. God has a full voice; Schoenberg uses singers (both adults and children), wood instruments, and speakers (both adults and children) to depict God when calling Moses through the burning bush. Musically representing God thus requires using all the forms of operatic utterance available as a means to juxtapose the transcendent divine nature with the temporal nature of humans. In opposition to this full musical expression lies Moses’s attempt to express verbally the idea of God. As Gyger puts it, Moses’s “opening words delimit *his* idea of God, which he will adhere to for the rest of the opera.”²³ Such a delimitation is limited, merely human, and thus always a failure in relationship to any true understanding of God. Unlike “A’s” underlying affirmation of the power of words to concretize truth, in Schoenberg’s view, human words, thoughts, and deeds all fail to concretize God, and the vision of life that follows is thus itself unstable.

If anything, Schoenberg uses music to mediate not abstract immediacy but rather desire, truth, and impossibility. He connects human thinking with conceptual ideas, revealing the idolatrous nature of our ideas about ultimate things. The opera mixes the profane with the sacred, the sensuous with the spiritual, suggesting that there is no pure position, no confident foundation upon which to speak or think about transcendent matters. What then becomes clear is not a representation of God but a deeper insight about the human condition: the desire for precision about the truths we live by, yet the very impossibility of such truth.

It is this mediacy that offers a profound challenge to “A’s” musical conception, for it speaks to the power of music to provoke self-reflection in the mind of a listener. “A,” while never making an explicit claim about the divine, nonetheless stresses that words make ideas and spirit concrete. But as such, he affirms the possibility of concretizing the idea of God, something Schoenberg suggests is impossible. This comparison then gives greater depth to the claim that underneath “A’s” view is Kierkegaard’s affirmation of *sola scriptura*. Even for “A,” words about God flow out from the clarity offered in the Word of God; there is thus a reliable foundation for thinking about God and the human-divine relationship.

Existence-Communication

The clearest difference between “A’s” aesthetic and Schoenberg’s work lies in the shape of the relationship between the music and listener or performer. Rather than enveloping one in a harmonious bubble of sensuous-erotic love, *Moses and Aaron* communicates the pain and frustration that comes with desiring clarity about the divine. This type of communication arises because, as Adorno puts it, Schoenberg’s opera communicates an “absolute metaphysical content,” one that places the opera in the realm of other great works of art that are “destroyed in the process and their broken outlines survive as the ciphers of a supreme unnamable truth.”²⁴ The opera deals with the impossibility of naming transcendence in the finite realm; it deconstructs the possibility about being certain about the nature of God. Like Moses’s recognition of the idolatry inherent even in the moral law, a life grounded in confidence in one’s view of God is a form of idolatry.

In Schoenberg’s hands, music expresses the impurity of human thinking when it comes to divine things, and the impossibility of the communication of God’s essence. “He uses the distortion of the notes,” writes Batnitzky, “which reaches its height in the character of Aron, to reflect the implicit tension that arises in the finite human’s desire to know the infinite God. . . . The point is that the problem of idolatry and representation is one intrinsic to the relationship between the human and God.”²⁵ The finite cannot contain the infinite; in *Moses and Aaron*, neither music nor words can concretize the divine. This leads another scholar to conclude, “In the end, perhaps all music is contaminated and compromised by its very audibility, its motility, its lack of changelessness.”²⁶ Words and thought are contaminated as well. In this end, it is this frustration that the opera communicates, leading listeners into their own dialectical web of possibility and impossibility to see the failure of human words.

Consequently, *Moses and Aaron* seductively plays with both the human desire to think of God and also, nonetheless, the reflective awareness that such concretization is impossible. Words and music work together to express the desire for reflection and clarity as such, but both fail in the process. Whereas “A” sees a life based on natural desire inherent in music’s sensuality, Schoenberg uses dissonance such that there is little to no pleasing harmonic sensuality. In *Moses and Aaron*, sensuality hurts the ear, and a listener is not seduced into further sensual desire but left amid the tension of saying something yet nothing about God.

In fact, rather than a seduction into sensual desire, the opera negates harmonious sensuousness as the means to confuse and frustrate the listener into an awareness about the impossibility of naming transcendence. The form of desire enacted by Schoenberg’s opera is the desire to surpass human limits and to know God. But this desire in the end is futile; it fails, and like Moses, the listener must acknowledge that any and all worldly representations of

God are themselves idols. Rather than the desire for endless erotic conquests and an aesthetic life, Schoenberg's desire leads to the frustrating and painful understanding that the human desire to find certainty about the ineffable is a doomed project.

While "A" suggests that music such as *Don Giovanni* is mere immediate presentness within the temporal scheme, Schoenberg's opera makes the listener a part of the very problematic tension he is exploring. The listener is listening to an idol, experiencing the frustration of wanting to say something positive about God yet being unable to do so. As a result, here music calls one to become not an erotically driven Don Juan but a frustrated Moses.

Some Kierkegaardian Implications

This comparison clarifies a number of implications about Kierkegaard's view of music. For one, in relation to "A's" critique, Schoenberg's work is a helpful reminder of the narrow frame through which "A" defines music. "A's" explanation focuses on only a *certain* kind of music, one exemplified by Mozart's opera, rather than a grand musical theory that can encompass all forms of music. "A's" view of music even runs counter to Kierkegaard's affirmation of hymnody in his journals.

Second, because of this narrow focus, when placed within Kierkegaard's broader existential authorship, "A" in reality uses this particular musical work to paint a seductive picture of the aesthetic life. His aim is to construct music as instantiating an existence driven by erotic desire and sensual immediacy. And Mozart's music expresses this sensuous, abstract desire to perfection. The words the Don sings, combined with the music, brim with eroticism rather than any spiritual truth. As a result, "A's" musical aesthetic is limited; he chooses one particular example and uses that to explore the aesthetic life rather than develop a robust conception of music itself.

Finally, and more important, considering "A" and Kierkegaard alongside of Schoenberg adds greater depth to the argument that Kierkegaard believes there is a stable foundation on which to understand God (even in the paradoxical form of Christ) as well as human life: the Bible. Music, when linked to such truths, can affirmatively impact Christian becoming. Whereas Schoenberg destabilizes word-grounded truth, "A" presents music as an alternative to verbal language, one rooted in eroticism and desire. But to do so he yet remains confident in the power of words to express truths that matter to moral formation. This claim gains further depth in recognizing that in Kierkegaard's own life, music, especially when connected to biblical truth, positively shaped his relationship to the world and his own self-development.

Don Giovanni, in "A's" presentation of it, is then an antihymn. It tears a person away from attending to the true words that matter: biblically expressed, Christian truth. It also speaks to the passionate, desirous dimensions of a self

in such a way that it charms one away from concern over being intentional about the type of life one lives. Music, with its power to affect human emotions and desires, when allied with Christian truth, can positively shape a self in its growth in the Christian life. But the opposite effect is possible as well; music can thus be an ally of Christian truth; it is never an end in itself but always a dimension of becoming a Christian subject.

This essay has used the comparison between “A’s” argument and *Moses and Aaron* as a means to develop a better picture of Kierkegaard’s musical aesthetic. A variety of larger questions yet remain. For instance, are hymns the only type of genuinely Christian music? Can *Don Giovanni* ever be redeemed and appreciated within the Christian life? Can there ever be nonword-based Christian music? Yet, the overall shape of Kierkegaard’s musical aesthetic suggests that these questions arise from an incorrect foundational assumption. Rather than a thoughtful elaboration of music itself, his attention is on how one hears and interprets music amid the highest task of existing as a Christian. Kierkegaard’s overall point is that any act of listening to music must be framed or “qualified” by the divinely given words that shape Christian existence. Thus, listening to music is ever a part of one’s ethical and religious development.

In fact, music, like other arts, is a relative project in the process of becoming a Christian. His authorship as a whole, full of beautiful twists and turns, offers a rhetorically beautiful example of just this aim. He uses his pen to provoke his readers to care about the type of person they are becoming. Music too is a form of “existence-communication” amid the cacophony of everyday life. And like writing, in this subjective task, music, particularly when linked to words that mediate Christian truth, can actually aid an individual in the provocative, self-reflective practices prominently featured throughout his authorship. But it can also tear one away from deeply reflecting on and enacting a higher form of existence. As a result, what matters most is how one listens to music in the never-ending process of becoming a true, Christian subject.

Notes

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.33.49; Latin text and English commentary, 3 vols., ed. James J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1:138; Eng.: *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1961), 238.

2. See, e.g., a letter Luther wrote in 1524 to George Spalatin, the theologian, chaplain, and secretary to Frederick the Wise of Saxony: “We have planned to follow the example of the prophets and the church fathers and to compose German songs for the German people so that God’s Word may resound in the singing of the people.” Quoted by Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music*, trans. Frida Best and Ralph Wood (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 38–39.

3. See also the essay by Nils Holger Petersen in this volume.—Ed.

4. Act 3 incomplete; “The Dance before the Golden Calf” (“Der Tanz um das goldene Kalb”), now in act 2, first performed in concert, Darmstadt, 1951; acts 1 and 2 first performed in concert, Hamburg, 1954; acts 1 and 2 first staged, Zürich, 1957.

5. With regard to making sense of the thorny issue of the connection between Kierkegaard’s thought and that of a pseudonym, I see the pseudonyms as authorial tactics that allow a reader to reflect imaginatively on the view of life presented by each pseudonym. So “A” presents a view of the aesthetic life. Yet, all of the various authorial tactics Kierkegaard uses are rooted in his aim of upbuilding his readers into a Christian existence. For more of this view, see Peder Jothen, *Kierkegaard, Aesthetics, and Selfhood: The Art of Subjectivity* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2014), 7–46.

6. David J. Gouwens, “Mozart among the Theologians,” *Modern Theology* 16, no. 4 (2000): 461–74, here 462.

7. In an October 11, 1837, journal entry, Kierkegaard affirms this “perfection” of Don Juan: “Having said previously that D. Juan is immediate musically, and thus describing the character’s infinite immanence in music, that action, character, and text stand in a necessary relation to one another as in no other opera. . . . I find this corroborated in noting that in the folk legend, the demonic is essentially musical” (SKS 17:244, DD:69 / KJN 1:235).

8. Kierkegaard’s original conception of the title of the essay in his journals demonstrates this view of music as lacking any reflective content. “[For the title ‘Immediate Erotic Stages,’ etc.] What Homer says is true of music: οἶον ἀκούομεν, οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν. *Iliad*, II. 486. One hears it, but he does not know it, does not understand it” (*Pap.* IV A 222, n.d. 1844 / JP 1:147).

9. Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 73.

10. For more on the critique of music by Hegel, see his *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, in *GWFHW* 10, ed. Heinrich Gustav Hotho, pt. 3 (1838): 125–219; A 2:888–955. These lectures, delivered in Berlin in the 1820s, were published first in 1835–38. “As his journals testify, Kierkegaard devoted himself to Hegel’s aesthetics during the years 1841–42.” Eric Ziolkowski, “Kierkegaard and the Aesthetic,” *Literature and Theology* 6, no. 1 (1992): 33–46, here 39. *Either/Or* was published in 1843.

11. In the introduction to his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel stresses that it is philosophy (as conceptual thought expressed through words) that reveals spirit, or *Idee*, most intelligibly. Any form of art thus is always a lower form of thinking and human activity than that offered by philosophy. See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, pt. 1 [prefatory sec.], in *GWFHW* 10, ed. Hotho, pt. 1 (1835): 136; A 1:104.

12. My view stresses a deep continuity throughout his authorship. This view follows, among others, Gouwens’s approach, which intertwines the pseudonymous and upbuilding works into a single whole frame that strives to challenge ideas of being a Christian for a variety of readers (including philosophers, Christians by birth but not practice, etc.). See David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 24–26.

13. Elisabete de Sousa, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: The Love for Music and the Music of Love," in *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions*, Tome 3: *Literature, Drama and Music*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 5 (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2009), 144.

14. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, trans. William Murray, Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra, dir. Carlo Maria Giulini, EMI Records, 2002, 253.

15. Sousa, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," 144.

16. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols., trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakos, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982–89), 1:68. George Pattison puts it more generally: "For in relation to the kind of scene shown in the image of the crucified one, the crucified image of God-in-human-form, aesthetic representation itself is judged to be a way of participating in the ongoing cruelty which characterizes the human rejection of divine love." *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 184.

17. Though using a German Protestant Bible, he maintained the use of traditional Hebrew spellings of names like "Aron."

18. Arnold Schoenberg, *Moses und Aron*, libretto trans. Allen Forte, Chorus of De Nederlandse Opera and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, dir. Pierre Boulez, Deutsche Grammophon, 1996, 24 (hereafter MA).

19. Bluma Goldstein, "Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*: A Vanishing Biblical Nation," in *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Charlotte Cross and Russell Berman (New York: Garland, 2000), 159.

20. Theodor W. Adorno, "Sacred Fragment," in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 239.

21. Lora Batnitzky, "Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and the Judaic Ban on Images," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 92 (2001): 73–90, here 82.

22. Elliot Gyger, "Speech, Song, and Silence: Modes of Utterance in *Moses und Aron*," *Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2007): 418–40, here 419.

23. *Ibid.*, 427.

24. Adorno, "Sacred Fragment," 226.

25. Batnitzky, "Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*," 82.

26. Daniel Albright, "Butchering Moses," *Opera Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2007): 441–54, here 451–52.

