

Review

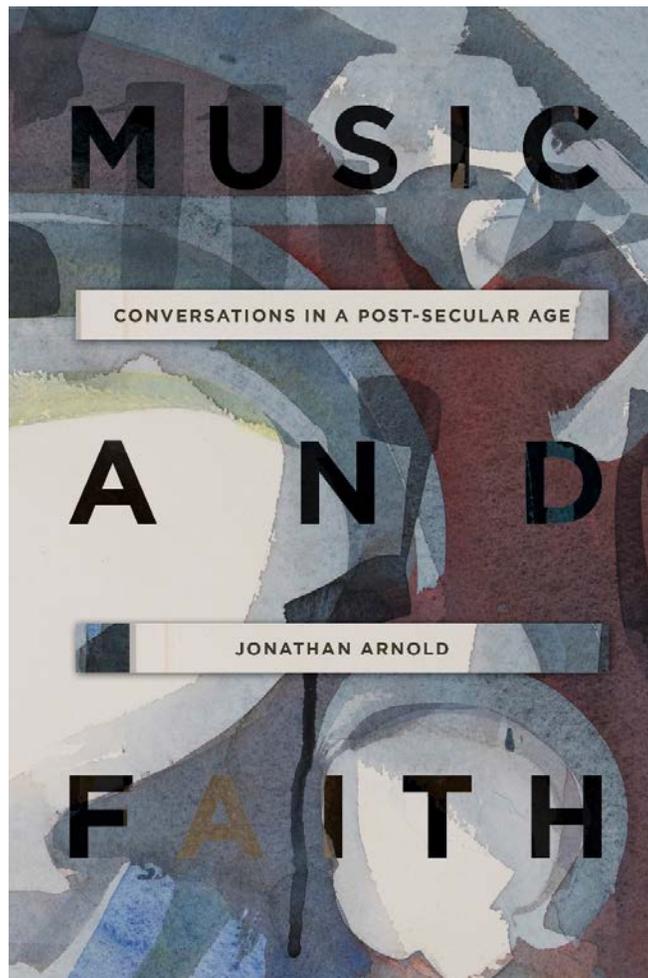
Jonathan Arnold:

Music and faith: Conversations in a post-secular age

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Reviewed by Roseanne Kydd



Jonathan Arnold writes with an impressive set of credentials. As an ordained priest in the Church of England with a PhD from King's College London, he was Dean of Divinity and Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, having recently moved to Canterbury to take up the position of Diocesan Director of Communities and Partnerships. But not before having established a career as a professional singer in several high-profile choral music ensembles, such as The Sixteen and the Tallis Scholars, an experience that prepared his rich bass voice to lead processions of choristers and academic clerks with a vocal skill few priests can claim.

With one foot firmly planted in *a capella* Renaissance liturgy and its contemporary composers, and the other in the theological domain of priestly ordination and service in the Church of England, Jonathan Arnold is uniquely positioned to explore Christian music in a great variety of worship and performance contexts. *Music and faith: Conversations in a post-secular age* is a welcome exploration of a church music scene that is in a state of flux, with "contemporary" selections nudging longstanding hymns to the margins of the worship repertoire in some contexts. Meanwhile, those places that have the resources, both in funding and musical excellence, are reversing the predominant paradigm of declining attendance with full houses enthralled with sung liturgies and cutting-edge choirs. While Arnold acknowledges the products of contemporary music publishing and the global ecclesial commercial Hillsong phenomenon, it is clear that his passion runs with the purebred stallions in the Renaissance stalls.

If so-called contemporary Christian music elicits but faint praise from the former Tallis Scholar, a foray into the treasure trove of the perfectly preserved six choir books of St. Peter's Church in Leiden would surely spark his interest. As an accomplished reader of Renaissance music, Arnold would find himself perfectly at home in sharing the Leiden choir books with the Dutch Egidius Kwartet and Consort Singers. The polyphonic texture of the Renaissance music – be it from the Flemish composers' scores lodged safely in St. Peter's in Leiden or the pens of the English Renaissance writers, Thomas Tallis and Christopher Tye – holds a strong appeal for singers trained in this demanding kind of liturgical music. Arnold draws attention to the Protestant Reformation that brought a new genre of music to both Europe and England, one that emphasized the importance of the words. Syllabic music which gave each syllable its own note is seen in the liturgical setting of John Merbecke, found in the various revisions since 1550 of the Book of Common Prayer in many Anglican church pews today. This elevation of the text echoes the priorities of John Calvin who in turn was under the influence of Erasmus, both of whom valued the clarity of words over music.

Music and faith: Conversations in a post-secular age is a sequel to *Sacred music in secular society*, an earlier work produced in 2014 that initiated this conversation between music and its listeners on the rather nebulous subject of a

particular kind of sacred music – high church ancient liturgies and their offshoots – and the impact on lovers of this genre, including composers, conductors, singers, organists, ecclesiastics and an aesthetic philosopher. The pattern which emerged from Arnold’s bifurcated stream of music and theology prepared the structure for this most recent companion volume. The 2014 work addressed those who worked within the established Church or with its musical products. The subsequent volume, *Music and faith*, moved to a broader sphere of audiophiles to embrace both those with a Church of England affiliation plus a less tenuous relationship to the Christian church and its religious commitments. These included conventional and unconventional believers, the unchurched, agnostics or self-confessed atheists, plus others situated anywhere along the compendium of transcendent awareness. Is it not curious, Arnold wonders, that the historical music of the monastery and cathedral finds a home in the hearts of such a wide distribution of spiritual convictions? How will probing this more diverse sampling of hearers illuminate what is being nurtured or initiated, thus connecting music with a supple notion of faith?

As a structural component of *Music and faith* – following the pattern of *Sacred music in secular society* – Arnold engages in penetrating conversations with select individuals from a range of disciplines and interests. Twelve of them have “interviewee” bios directly before the preface to assist the reader in orienting the exchanges to follow. However, many more people of interest are also interviewed or consulted via their publications, Jeremy Begbie being a frequently sought example. Among these bios are: 1. a bishop; 2. a distinguished writer; 3. a globally exhibited artist; 4. another award-winning author with a Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity; 5. a rural dean with exceptional musical qualifications; and 6. another author and rural dean. These strike one as clearly among the renowned and celebrated within the Church of England, with one being a professional musician and cleric.

The next three of the interviewees presented depart from those with explicit Church of England ties and include: 7. a renowned neuropsychiatrist, 8. an eminent international scholar in music and liturgy, and 9. an Oxford professor of evolutionary psychology. Lastly in a list that is ordered alphabetically are three women, in addition to the female artist who designed the book’s beautiful cover, Jane Boulton. 10. The first is a professor of medieval English, Elisabeth Dutton of Fribourg University, Switzerland, who has revived some plays from late medieval England that incorporate the recently formed Frideswide Voices of girls aged seven to fourteen established to sing in the Oxford college chapels. Her Medieval Convent Drama project discovered surprising involvement of girls and women in these dramas from convents in France and Belgium. 11. The next is a young woman working on a PhD in music, with an Oxford undergraduate education in

music at Worcester College. This person aligns her faith closely to music and art. 12. To conclude is a woman with international experience in her education who has become a professional integrative counsellor specializing in “more vulnerable pupils” (xiii).

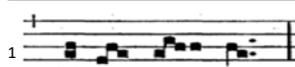
These twelve consist of fewer expert musicians and Anglican clerics than his 2014 work, although Arnold has not altogether escaped this preponderance. With the exception of the last two women in his list, he has pretty much become fixed in a world of academia and professionals.

Two words, “music” and “faith,” drawn from the title, are the drivers of the work. Each word is multi-faceted and prone to be indefinite in meaning. The book’s cover with its musical symbols frames the topic with Jane Boulton’s painting: *Neumes, Virgin and Child, Study III*.¹ Indeed, Arnold’s special focus is on those whose journey of faith, whether religious believers or not, is intricately bound up with music to the extent that it involved life altering experiences. This may have been Christian faith or simply the evocation of “immense meaning and mystery” through an encounter with this music.

How does Arnold explain his usage of “faith”? He appears to want to include everyone in this understanding of “faith” who is in any way moved or affected by the music. It could be contended that creating such a broad category has the effect of diluting its significance. By contrast, the Christian concept of faith, while open to all, is a robust notion that would not allow Arnold’s example of Richard Dawkins to be either a person “of faith” or even marked by any but the most *sui generis* “spirituality.”

On the other hand, the “music” Arnold explores has a very specific nature. It is not composed by atheists or agnostics but flows from the pens of composers nurtured in the Christian faith. These may stem from the religious milieu of medieval European or sacred music sung by accomplished choirs affiliated with such churches as the Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Roman Catholic, or professional groups like the Tallis Scholars, The Sixteen, and Polyphony. Another way to define the terms music and faith might be to perceive many of today’s “post secular” listeners as longing for a world not wracked by doubt or a celebrated individualism but rather marked by community and greater social stability.

An example from one interviewee may serve as an appetiser for the feast this book comprises. As a person who has spent much time in parish churches and cathedrals finding objects that inspire transmission into art, Jane Boulton is articulate in expressing the theological impetus that has propelled her thinking. If



¹ Here is an example of neumes from a Solemnes manuscript. They are musical notes to identify precise pitches, the predecessors of modern notation but still used in current editions of plainchant.

“hearing” can be “seeing” and “seeing” can be “hearing,” then Boulton provides a unique means to illustrate this crossover in her watercolours. Her fascination with the medieval music fragments of stark black neumes or blood red lozenges has produced a marriage of sight and sound symbols as in her painting *Tenebrae: Blackfriars Oxford II* (figure 4). Her *Plain chant, choral evensong* (figure 5) is marked by a strict orderliness of lines with neumes depicted as diamonds, squares and ligatures against a background of a cross and illumined chancel shrouded in a mist of Holy Presence. In her interview with Arnold, Boulton describes the idea she had established of “...making pictures that tried to express the sensation of hearing sacred music as an integral part of a specific religious service” (71). Boulton illustrates well her immersion in a life of faith expressed in multidimensional modern art inspired by “electrifying” music transmogrified into colours and shapes that evoke sounds and rhythm. Arnold has found in Jane Boulton and her work a very effective illustration of the melding of music and faith in the medium of art infused with musical suggestions.

You, reader, will be the judge of how successful Arnold has been in assigning so much power to music as a means of the transformation of people’s lives. The breadth of knowledge gained from such a number of diverse interviewees and other sources consulted might just as readily be explained by what the music pointed to. I can only imagine the great humility of some of these composers whose express goal was to elevate the source of their inspiration, seeing their music as a conduit towards the Divine. Indeed, music is effective in nurturing faith but is not itself the source of transformation. We might do well to recall J. S. Bach’s habit of stamping his completed compositions with SDG, Soli Deo Gloria – “to the Glory of God Alone.”

About the reviewer

Dr. Roseanne Kydd is entering her third year as Director of Music at St. Peter’s Anglican Church in Cobourg (Ontario, Canada). Her research interests focus on assessing the broad spectrum of music in the Anglican Church which ranges from contemporary music to the cathedral music now associated with professional groups of Renaissance music. Dr. Kydd’s two master’s degrees reflect her double concentration in piano performance and musicological writing: M.Mus, McGill University (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), and M.A. Music Criticism, McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada). Her doctoral dissertation, completed at York University (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), is titled “Organicism in musicology: A critique of selected twentieth-century writings.”

