



The Bible and Music

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PALNI OPEN PRESS
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA



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Publisher's Note

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Preface

I was excited to write this book for many reasons, including the opportunity it provided to connect my long-standing love of music with my work as an educator and researcher in biblical studies. The technology of e-books and online music streaming is another. We live in a time when so much music is readily available. Whereas in the past it would have been necessary to have a print book with a CD in a sleeve in the back, now music can be included directly within the book. I hope that readers' and listeners' enjoyment of both text and music will be enriched by this format. Many of us have long hoped for the day when it would be possible to have music included seamlessly alongside text that introduces, explains, and comments on it. The book also seeks to take advantage of the online format by including hyperlinks to additional information about composers, biblical texts, terminology, and other such matters. Where information is crucial to the reader, as a rule it has been included within the book itself. Nevertheless, some readers may undoubtedly come to this text knowing a great deal about the Bible, music, or both, while the same will not be true for others. Some will already know many things but still be eager to learn more. Every book will inevitably contain references to people with whom some readers are not familiar or use words that some readers have not encountered before. The online format puts the information that readers of print books would have to Google or look up just an easy click away. Hopefully for those utilizing the book in other formats, the presence of added features for online readers will in no way detract from or interfere with the use and enjoyment of the book simply as text without embedded and linked content.

Among others, I wish to thank Bonnie Somers and her colleagues at the [Milken Archive of Jewish Music](#), Bruce Adolphe, Tamás Beischer-Matyó, Victoria Bond, Delyvn Case, Andrea Clearfield, Catherine Duce, Frank Felice, James Lee III, Honji Song,

Eric Stark, Pēteris Vasks, Gundega Vaska, and Amy-Jill Levine (whose amazingly detailed feedback on a draft of the book led to many improvements, even though it still has many shortcomings). These stand alongside countless others I undoubtedly ought to have mentioned and have neglected to but who nonetheless provided suggestions about musical works to mention. I am grateful to, and mention in this collective fashion, the students in the course I teach at Butler University on the subject of the Bible and music. In addition to providing feedback on drafts of this textbook as I tried it out as the assigned reading and listening for that class, each semester they have introduced me to new music, some of which has been incorporated into this book and subsequent iterations of the course.

Introduction

In some courses and books that bring two things together, the scope is narrowed and made more manageable. Bring together religion and science fiction and some aspects of both are excluded, leaving us with a point of intersection that is somewhat more manageable to study and discuss. Bringing together the Bible and music, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. The texts that have received little or no musical exploration are relatively few, while others have been and continue to be set to music countless times. One could try in vain to cover all settings of Psalm 23 (the one that starts with “The Lord is my shepherd” in many English translations) in a semester. One could spend yet another semester attempting to do the same with the Magnificat (found in Luke 1:46–55, often referred to as “Mary’s Song”). It would pose a real challenge merely to attempt *listing* all relevant musical settings, never mind *listening* to them all. The latter faces the additional hurdle that some settings of any given biblical text have never been recorded. Moreover, during the course of any given semester, the odds are that at least one composer somewhere in the world will be hard at work on creating yet another musical setting of biblical text.

This book thus makes no claim to provide a comprehensive treatment of its subject matter but rather offers an introduction and survey. Although many books have been written about the Bible and music, few aim for the breadth of this one, seeking to cover the music behind and in the Bible as well as the musical reception and interpretation of the Bible over the centuries and around the globe in the wide array of genres and styles of music through which human beings have explored these texts. Some introductions are aimed at specific religious audiences or those with advanced training in music; while this one presumes neither, it should nevertheless be of interest to people in both categories. Many books focus exclusively on a particular composer or songwriter, a specific

time period, or one type of composition. This book seeks to provide an introduction to the vast, extensive array of material that interested readers may then explore in more detail through other books if they so choose. It is nonsectarian and presumes prior knowledge of neither the Bible nor music (although the chances are that anyone choosing to read a book on this topic or take a course about it will have at least some vague familiarity with one or both). It also aims to provide something that other books on this subject do not by incorporating examples of relevant music directly within the text so that you can read and listen simultaneously (or, when appropriate, stop reading in order to listen intently, yet without having to close your book and look elsewhere for the musical excerpt). If you're used to textbooks, think of this as a text music book.

Another advantage of the open textbook is the ease with which it can be revised and improved. New text and listening material may be added by the author, and any musical examples that vanish from the internet can be replaced. Here, too, readers can help by alerting the author if they notice this happens. That will allow the change to be made almost immediately. Also, readers can suggest additions, and educators who use this resource can adapt it for their purposes. It is hoped that the breadth of coverage and the intended audience with this new and innovative format will result in a truly useful resource. If you find that not to be the case, let the author know.

What does it mean to explore the intersection of the Bible and music? Is it music in the Bible, texts from the Bible set to music, or allusions to the Bible in popular songs? It is all those things and more.

One example I often turn to is the song “Dry Bones” (sometimes called “Dem Bones”), which [many people have heard in childhood](#), perhaps in an anatomy class or at Halloween. They may not, however, know the song’s original form or that it is based on [a passage in the book of Ezekiel](#) in the Bible (37:1–15). Indeed, they may have wondered (if the encounter was through an [anatomy lesson](#))

why the bones were dry! Here is the original version of the song performed by the Delta Rhythm Boys, who first made it famous.¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=27#oembed-1>

The words of the song were [written](#) by [James Weldon Johnson](#), best known for writing the words to “[Lift Every Voice and Sing](#),” sometimes called the “Black National Anthem.” In Ezekiel’s vision, the people of Judah might be considered to be dead, having had their capital and temple destroyed and a significant part of the population carried off in captivity. The vision is interpreted as a divine promise that the nation can live again.

Even students with no biblical or musical background can notice some things the words and music do, just by listening. In the song, Ezekiel himself is involved in the process of reconnecting the bones. The connection takes place step by step, through a slow process of reconnection, rebuilding the body. Why might the songwriters have done this? A comparison may be useful with the way that [spirituals](#) (traditional religious songs that emerged out of and reflect the African American experience) tend to treat the language of liberation from slavery and of a promised land found in Exodus. Slavery was not expected to simply end all of a sudden. The struggle for civil rights will not end overnight. Students can hear the music paint the picture as it moves upward step-by-step in small increments. They do not need to know that this is called

1. This performance by the Delta Rhythm Boys was recorded on November 9, 1952. It is shared on YouTube by the Ed Sullivan Show.

chromatic movement to hear the effect of the way the music and words reinforce the message.

That is just one example of the kind of interesting thing that can be explored at the intersection of the Bible and music.² Another example is the song [“She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain.”](#) which at first glance appears to have nothing to do with the Bible whatsoever—and in its present form, it doesn’t. The familiar folk song originated as a spiritual in the nineteenth century with the title “When the Chariot Comes.”³ That song first appeared in print in [New England Magazine 19, no. 6 \(February 1899\), which can now be read online](#). It would be interesting to know (and can be interesting to

WHEN THE CHARIOT COMES.

1. O who will drive the cha-riot when she
cu-hu-hu-hu-hums? O who will drive the
cha-riot when she comes? O who will drive the
cha-riot? O who will drive the cha-riot?
O who will drive the chariot when she comes?

2—King Jesus, he'll be driver, when she
cu-hu-hu-hu-hums, etc.

3—She'll be loaded with bright angels, etc.

4—She will neither rock nor totter, etc.

5—She will run so level and steady, etc.

6—She will take us to the portills, etc.

Sheet music of the melody and lyrics to “When the Chariot Comes,” a precursor of “She’ll be Comin’ ’Round the Mountain.” [The New England magazine, n.s.v.19 \(1898-99\), p. 718, by New England Magazine Co., is in the public domain.](#)

2. Some readers may be familiar with other music inspired by this passage in Ezekiel. Examples from contemporary Christian music include [Casting Crowns' song “Spirit Wind”](#) and Lauren Daigle’s song [“Come Alive \(Dry Bones\)”](#).
3. I am grateful to Gabi Natalizio for drawing the origin of this folksong to my attention. The image of the divine chariot also appears in the famous spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” mentioned in [chapter 5 on spirituals](#).

speculate about) the decisions that led to the [secularization](#) of this religious song.⁴

I like to start with these kinds of examples because they illustrate how there can be hidden biblical connections in music you know well. There are plenty more examples that could be provided besides these in which recognizing a biblical connection will breathe new life into music or text that may have become like dry bones to you. Those bones can live again. The potential of music to have an impact of that sort, one that seems to go beyond the realm of ordinary possibility, is something that composers, clergy, and many others have thought about and reflected on. Music can inspire, and music can manipulate—perhaps nowhere more so than when it acts in conjunction with words that hearers consider sacred.

On the other hand, for many today, appreciation of sacred music is despite or irrespective of its religious connections rather than because of them. Music has been turned to in order to draw people in and to help foster belief. Composer [Howard Goodall](#), whose [setting of Psalm 23](#) provides the theme music for the television show *The Vicar of Dibley*, wrote this about the [power](#) of music:

Music's strange alchemy is a mystery. And it is my personal view that Christianity is also a mystery. The two have formed so compelling a marriage over the last thousand or so years because a person standing in a church, chapel, cathedral,

4. Frank C. Brown categorizes it as a parody or secularization of “The Old Ship of Zion,” which has similar words and the same melody. Frank C. Brown, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore: The Folklore of North Carolina, Collected by Dr. Frank C. Brown during the Years 1912 to 1943, in Collaboration with the North Carolina Folklore Society*, vol. 3, *Folk Songs from North Carolina*, ed. Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 460–61.

or abbey who hears ethereal or uplifting music has a much stronger sense of something “outside” their normal existence than if they are simply listening to a man discussing a passage from St Paul. Intelligent and perceptive as St Paul’s thinking undoubtedly is, it is not magical. If you are expecting your flock to have faith in a man rising from the dead, a virgin birth, a host of totally implausible miracles, or the bodily transfer of God into an edible wafer, you will need stronger special effects up your sleeve than a man waving around some incense. Music, an abstract and elusive art that disarms one’s emotional defenses and saturates us in feeling and confusion, is almost the only thing we have left that can convey a majestic and disturbing mystery.⁵

Both because of the beautiful and profoundly moving experience we may have listening to such music and because of music’s power to move us on an emotional level that bypasses our normal processes of reasoning, studying the intersection of the Bible and music is extremely important and valuable—and to some extent even necessary. This is true not only for the purpose of fostering spiritual experiences or preventing the abuse of our susceptibility to manipulation through religion but even simply for those wishing to understand human cultures past and present, as this book will explore throughout. Whatever your interest in this topic, you will surely find much here that relates directly to it, and you will also discover aspects of the intersection of the Bible and music that will surprise you.

5. Howard Goodall, “Music and Mystery,” in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 29–30.

For Further Reading

Paul Oliver. *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 147–48.

PART I

HISTORY

Before turning our attention to the interaction of the Bible and music as a form of reception history of the text, we begin with the evidence we have for music behind and in the Bible. We will then trace threads that run from there through ancient Israel, Judaism, the early church, and beyond.

I. Ancient Music behind and in the Bible

In this chapter you will

- explore indications in the Bible that some of its famous stories were passed down orally through song before being written
- see how translation bridges our time and others but also obscures differences
- find out what we know about ancient music before the Bible and what it tells us about music in the Bible
- learn about the different historical and musical contexts of ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity

Biblical Music before the Bible

Some of the oldest traditions in the Bible may have been transmitted through [music](#). The story of the exodus was probably passed on in [song](#) long before it became a focus of a written tale. Miriam, the sister of Moses, and other women are said to have sung of the event and to have led the people in song ([Exodus 15:20–21](#)). Of this, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso has said, “When the people of Israel crossed the Sea of Reeds to freedom, Miriam took her timbrel

and led the women in dance. Because of Miriam and Moses' Song of the Sea, generations remember the crossing. It forms an important part of the Jewish liturgy. A generation later, when Joshua led the people across the Jordan, another miracle happened. However, no one sang, and so no one remembered."¹ In turn, [Debbie Friedman](#), a [songwriter who had a powerful impact on contemporary synagogue music](#), wrote a song of her own about Miriam's song.²



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In the case of the “[Song of Deborah](#)” found in [Judges 5](#), the situation may be similar to that mentioned in connection with [the “Song of Miriam” in Exodus](#). Some scholars have sought to [detect an earlier version](#) lying behind the present one. The words of [Deborah’s song](#) are chanted in synagogues annually. It has also been set to music in other ways, including [in the original Hebrew](#) as well as in [a metrical hymn in English with seventeen verses](#).³ The story of Deborah and her song have also been given [contemporary gospel](#)

1. Quote provided in personal correspondence with the author, who is very grateful to Rabbi Sasso for her input as well as for her work fostering artistic engagement with the Bible in her Religion, Spirituality, and the Arts program in Indianapolis.
2. This performance by Debbie Friedman was recorded on December 9, 2001, at Hynes Convention Center, Boston, Massachusetts. It is shared on a YouTube channel dedicated to Friedman's memory.
3. On metrical settings of Scriptures—in particular, the Psalms—see [chapter 4](#) in this book.

and [death metal](#) treatments by Christian artists in English.⁴ Here is a choral setting of part of the song in Judges (Judges 5:2–3, 10, 12) by American composer Adolphus Hailstork.⁵



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Note also the “[Song of the Well](#)” in [Numbers 21:17–18](#), which may be another example of the same kind.

4. There are also several [songs](#) in [Spanish](#) that set the “Song of Deborah and Barak” to music or tell her story.
5. “The Song of Deborah” by Adolphus Hailstork is performed here by the Choir of St. Andrew and St. Paul (Montreal, Canada), with Jean-Sébastien Vallée conducting. It is shared on YouTube by the choir.

Translating the Bible and Music

When modern speakers of English read the Bible in a translation into their native tongue, this can obscure the enormous gulf in time and space, language and culture, that separates us and our world from that of the biblical authors and the stories they tell us. We hear words like *lamp*, *house*, and *city* and instinctively envisage things we are familiar with. Perhaps bringing music into the picture (with assistance from archaeologists and historical reconstructions) can help jolt us out of this mind-set and alert us to the difference between the objects with which we have direct experience and their ancient counterparts. We may read that [David played a harp](#) or encounter a reference to flutes in the Psalms and imagine the

instruments we know. Alternatively, we may come across a reference to a lute or [lyre](#) and not have a sense of what one is, since it is not widely used in our time and context. When we look into the terms (as we will in the remainder of this chapter), we discover how much even familiar instruments have evolved and how different ancient ones seem to have been. We are made aware of the limits of our individual knowledge as a guide to interpreting the text as well as some instances when even our collective human efforts to investigate leave us uncertain. We are also alerted to aspects of the



Silver lyre from Royal Cemetery of Ur (in the British Museum). [Silver lyre, PG 1237, Royal Cemetery of Ur.jpg](#), by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg), is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license](#).

process of Bible translation that we may not have noticed previously. If translators use a familiar term that denotes a form of an object that differs from the ancient one, the reader understands the translation but ends up with a mental picture different from what the author of the text had in mind. Does this matter? Do you think it would be better if the translator instead used a term that is more accurate but unfamiliar to the reader? What about leaving a term untranslated so that one reads about the [kinnor and tof](#) (two Hebrew words for instruments that occur in the Bible)? In some instances, we aren't even certain what a [term](#) meant and therefore cannot hope to translate it accurately with any certainty. The process of translating the Bible and then reading and interpreting that translation can be taken for granted, although if you compare different translations, you will find they at times reflect each of the possible choices I just mentioned. The example of musical instruments, terminology, and the very sounds themselves help us make sense of not only biblical references to music but the process of reading and understanding an ancient text like the Bible more generally.

The Oldest Surviving Music

It is helpful to begin by acknowledging what we do not know and, sadly, can never know. There are no recordings of music from the ancient world. We can never hear it as it sounded. And yet what we do know is surprisingly much. We have images of instruments in engravings and on coins that often provide a sufficiently realistic depiction to allow musicologists to construct replicas. We have some [very ancient texts about music](#). We even have what today would be called “sheet music” or [musical notation](#) carved in stone. The “Hurrian Hymn” found at a site known as Ugarit or Ras Shamra

in what is today Syria is probably the [oldest example](#).⁶ In the same era in which [Israel first began to be mentioned as a people in the land of Canaan in ancient sources](#), their neighbors in the [ancient Near East](#) told stories and recorded their melodies using [cuneiform](#), a method of writing used in that time and part of the world to inscribe language on clay. While there are unanswered questions, puzzles, and mysteries, musicologists and scholars of the ancient world can figure out a great many things from these texts. Here is one example, in which Peter Pringle performs a modern rendering of the music that has come down to us in written form using instruments and sounds that correspond at least roughly to those used in that part of the world in ancient times.⁷



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If you do not read music, you may be wondering what it means for music to be turned into a text that can be discovered millennia later, understood, and performed. If you want to learn that skill, there are many resources available. This book will never presume that you have a background in music, but over the course

6. The Hurrian civilization was based in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and stretched through a significant part of the Near East, including into Canaan (the territory where Israel would come to be located).
7. This performance by Peter Pringle features a lute that he himself made. The video is shared on Pringle's YouTube channel, which includes other examples of reconstructed ancient instruments and performances of ancient music.

of it, you will undoubtedly pick up a number of concepts and skills along the way. If you do know music, you'll get more out of many things discussed here, but that does not necessarily mean you need to know music before you begin reading. Taking the time to go beyond the book and learn more about music, and/or about the Bible, is worthwhile and will enrich your experience as well as your life more generally. This book does its best to allow you to benefit even if you have no background in the Bible, music, or either, and yet you get much more out of it if you do.

Music in Ancient Israel

Turning specifically to ancient Israel, we have art from places like [Megiddo](#) in Israel that depict what are presumably also instruments mentioned in the Bible, such as the [lyre](#). Here is another performance provided by [Peter Pringle](#) using an instrument that he built as a replica of one depicted in an inscription on ivory found in an ancient royal palace that archaeologists excavated in Megiddo.⁸



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Biblical scholars have long consulted texts from Ugarit as relevant background to the study of the ideas and practices in the

8. Video from Peter Pringle's YouTube channel. [There is more information on his website.](#)

Hebrew Scriptures (what Jews call the Tanakh and Protestants refer to as the Old Testament). Similar words for sacrifices appear, and gods and goddesses worshipped by the Israelites and their neighbors (for which biblical authors castigate and condemn them) have their stories told in texts from Ugarit. Just as these texts provide evidence of the kinds of stories, beliefs, and religious practices that were around at that time, there is good reason to think that the music of Ugarit and ancient Israel would have been similarly related. The Bible uses many musical terms that remain somewhat obscure to us. Sometimes etymology—that is, looking at the roots of a word—can be enough to allow us to deduce the meaning. In other instances, the same or similar musical terms are used in texts from other ancient cultures, and this provides important clues. For instance, the sistrum mentioned just once in the Bible ([2 Samuel 6:5](#)) apparently refers to an instrument that we know about and actually have [surviving examples of from ancient Egypt](#). A sistrum is a rattle, and it was [used in Egypt, especially in religious contexts](#). There is some uncertainty about the meaning, and thus you may find that other translations offer a different rendering. The [NRSV](#), for example, translates the Hebrew word (which comes from a root meaning “to shake”) as “castanets.” [Examples of that instrument have also been found in ancient Egypt](#). The sharing of musical instruments, as well as terms for them in common, shows us that in the ancient world, just like today, music did not remain within boundaries of people groups, territorial borders, or languages but moved between cultures.

Music in Early Christianity

Thus far you have been reading about ancient Israel, the people and culture that gave rise to Judaism (from the tribe and kingdom of Judah). The texts that came to be the Scriptures of Judaism in turn also became all or part of the Christian Old Testament,

depending on which Christian denomination one is referring to. Christianity comes along much later than ancient Israel—more than a millennium, later in fact—during the time of the Roman Empire. Since the first Christians were Jews, they participated in the musical traditions found in Judaism in that era.

There are texts in the New Testament that may have been the words to songs that early Christians sang.

A hymn is a religious song, usually one addressed to a deity.

[Philippians 2:6–11](#) is a particularly good example. [Colossians 1:15–20](#) is another. The book of Revelation is full of singing and may have drawn on songs used in churches at that time. There may thus be [hymns that are quoted by New Testament authors](#), although we cannot be certain, and scholars continue to debate this question. At any rate, the texts do not provide clues about what musical accompaniment there may have been if any. We have references to singing but know little about what they sang or how they sang it, although they undoubtedly sang the Psalms, just as Jesus did ([Matthew 26:30](#)).

Our [earliest Christian music with notation](#)—that is, with the music written down and not only the words—was found on a [papyrus at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt](#).⁹ You can [read a translation and see pictures of the manuscript online](#) in various places. Here is a modern attempt to record what that text indicates, performed by [Atrium Musicae de Madrid](#).¹⁰

9. On this see further Wendy J. Porter, “The Composer as Biblical Interpreter,” in *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible*, ed. Martin O’Kane (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 126–53.
10. Provided to YouTube by the label Harmonia Mundi. Atrium Musicae de Madrid was conducted by Gregorio Paniagua.



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Music as Illustration

There are references to music and musical instruments in the Bible beyond those associated with the song lyrics in the Psalms or hymn-singing in churches. Jesus mentions playing music for dancing on a flute and singing a dirge (Matthew 11:17; Luke 7:32). First Corinthians includes references to a clashing gong, a clanging cymbal ([13:1](#)), and a trumpet or bugle making an unclear sound ([14:8](#)). In other cases, we sometimes think of things as “songs” even when there is no explicit mention of singing or music (as in the “songs” of Mary and Simeon in Luke’s Gospel, which we discuss later in this book). We won’t have room to cover every possible mention of or intersection with music here. Search for music-related keywords in an online Bible if you want to dig deeper into what the Bible has to say that is potentially relevant.

Exploring Further

There are important questions that we should ask about music behind and in the Bible, which you may want to further investigate. Who made music? Was everyone involved in some way in local

communities? Did men and [women](#) participate equally in playing instruments and singing? Were there “professionals,” specialists who made music as performers for public entertainment, in a similar manner to the Levites who sang in the temple? (*Temple* is another term that misleads many people reading the Bible today, who may envisage a “synagogue” or “church” rather than a place dedicated primarily to animal sacrifice.) Who sang the Psalms in the Bible even before they were written down and became part of the collection we know today? When and where were they sung? Were certain psalms connected with specific holidays and festivals? We will look more at the Psalms separately, and they will get attention more than once in this book, since they are obviously important evidence about music in the Bible as well as texts that have continued to be set to new music ever since.

If you are interested in exploring this topic further, museum exhibits have a lot to offer that is relevant. For instance, those who wish to dig further into this subject may usefully visit an [online exhibit at the Penn Museum featuring Mesopotamian musical instruments](#). An [article in *Forward*](#) describes an exhibit of musical instruments from the Bible in Tulsa, Oklahoma. [Potsdam Public Museum in New York has a collection](#). Visual art from the past, such as paintings and [inscriptions on coins](#), can provide important information about what instruments were probably like in the biblical world as well as how [later generations imagined them](#) in light of what they were familiar with.

Levites, descendants of Levi, had responsibilities in the Temple which included music (see e.g. [1 Chronicles 9:33](#)).

For Further Reading

Bayer, Bathja. "The Finds That Could Not Be." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 8, no. 1 (1982): 20–33.

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2. Chanting in Synagogues

In this chapter you will

- explore how markings found in very old manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible may tell us how they were once sung
- learn how musicologists and others have attempted to interpret and perform the music thus revealed
- discover how Jews around the world chant their Scriptures today in synagogues

Musical Notation in Biblical Manuscripts?

We do not have anything like direct access to the music of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. We have the texts of psalms that are likely to have been used there. The headings at the start of many of the psalms, unlike headings you may see elsewhere in some Bibles, are in this case actually part of the Hebrew text.¹ A number of [terms](#) provide indications about the music that went with them, how they were used, and/or what inspired them. Some of them indicate that

1. For example, the header in Psalm 3 reads, “A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.”

those specific psalms were sung in particular styles or to existing melodies. A number of [articles](#) will let you dig into the specific words, what they tell us, and what still remains mysterious or puzzling about them if you wish to explore that topic further.

Can we ever hope to even make a plausible guess at what the Psalms sounded like musically? We do have some very ancient clues about what

Cantillation denotes the ritual chanting of scripture readings and prayers.

was done musically with the Bible a very long time ago, most likely in the setting of synagogues. Whether any of that music was based on traditions that stemmed from the time when a temple stood in Jerusalem is impossible to know for certain. The clues I am referring to are markings found in [manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible](#) dating back more than a thousand years. They are sometimes referred to as “accents” but are more likely [cantillation marks](#). In a printed Hebrew Bible, you can see these marks above and below the consonants (along with the other more frequent signs above and below consonants that indicate vowels). This practice goes back much earlier, to a time before the printing press, when scriptural texts were copied by hand. The photo that follows illustrates what it looks like. Do not worry if you do not know how to read Hebrew. The point is to show you what the thing described and discussed here looks like, not to teach you the system (although, by all means, learn that if you are interested!).



Song of Songs in the manuscript Halper 34 in the University of Pennsylvania Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library. [Halper 34 Song of Solomon 2:13-3:3; Song of Solomon 4:6-14, fol. 1r](#), from the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, is in the [public domain](#).

Those [cantillation symbols](#) are [impressively old](#), found already in [manuscripts from a millennium ago](#). That is also roughly a millennium after the destruction of the Second Temple.² Music, and words set to music, can persist across centuries. It doesn't remain unchanged, but something can still be recognizable even after much time as a version of the same song. We cannot know whether later communities of Jews sang songs that had been handed down for a millennium or two or even three. We can only say that music and singing have the potential to do that.

So what do these markings indicate? That is something of a mystery—or rather a code to which we lack the key. This is not

2. The first temple in Jerusalem is supposed to have been built by Solomon and was destroyed by the Babylonians around 586 BC. The one that was built to replace it is known as the Second Temple. It is the one that existed in the time of Jesus, which was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 AD.

to say that there are not [long-standing traditions in Judaism](#) about what the markings mean and how to sing them. There certainly are—more than one of them, [each quite different](#)! There is thus no consensus that any of the current-day practices reflect the original significance of the cantillation marks. Indeed, the different traditions probably indicate that the original meaning of the markings was forgotten, although it is possible that one stream of tradition preserved something of their original meaning continuously. That is what I meant when I referred to them as akin to a “code.” The good news is that codes can sometimes be cracked, and there is a good chance that at least one investigator has done so in this case.

Let’s start from the beginning. We mentioned in the previous chapter that we have texts older than the Bible with musical notation in cuneiform. In fact, there we were referring to the earliest complete song. We have an even older fragment that may be as many as four thousand years old and represents our earliest example of written music. It comes from Mesopotamia, and you can [see it in the Schoyen Collection](#). (Those interested in how this musical notation worked may wish to consult composer [Dr. Pat Muchmore’s](#) explanation on [StackExchange](#) and [Sara de Rose’s explanation on her Music Circle website](#).) We also have ancient evidence (as well as a [tradition of practice that has continued to the present day](#)) that indicates the use of hand gestures by those leading communal singing.

There have been many attempts to figure out what the cantillation marks in the Hebrew Bible indicate. One of the most famous is that of [Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura](#), a French musicologist who used music theory to guide her, coming up with a way of understanding the music of the Bible that may or may not be the “original” but is at the very least plausible. Here is an episode of NPR radio’s *Morning Edition* from 1986 with an audio overview of her work.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-1>

As you heard in the episode, Haïk-Vantoura was informed by music theory and a diverse Jewish upbringing that helped alert her to the fact that Jews in different places sang the text in different ways. This was an important clue that she needed to not simply follow these contradictory traditions but instead work inductively from the text itself.

An interesting piece of evidence is that there are places where this reconstruction seems to be very similar to some chanting traditions not only in Judaism but also in Christianity. Psalm 114 is a striking example when we compare the melody traditionally used in Gregorian chant (a form of liturgical singing in Roman Catholicism), the melody in North African Jewish tradition, and the melody that emerges using Haïk-Vantoura's system. The Gregorian chant melody is known as *tonus peregrinus*, or "foreign melody," perhaps suggesting that it was borrowed and adapted from elsewhere. Have a listen to it in this recording by the St. Thomas Choir.³



3. "In exitu Israel" is performed by men of the Choir of St. Thomas the Apostle, South Wigston, singing at Friday evensong in Durham Cathedral, July 2010. It is shared on YouTube by [John Gull](#), who has worked with the choir.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-2>

Now let's listen to Haïk-Vantoura's reconstruction of the melody for Psalm 114 in the Hebrew Bible. Bob MacDonald has written books and [blog posts](#) and created [YouTube videos](#) elaborating on Haïk-Vantoura's system. He has also used the power of modern computing to automate the process, allowing much faster and more detailed progress to be made. Here is what the melody of Psalm 114 sounds like as rendered using this system.⁴



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-3>

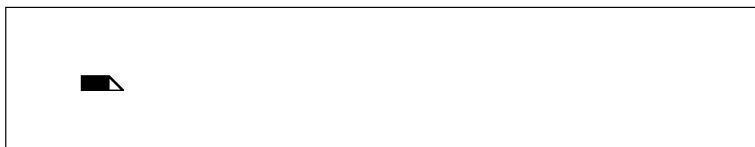
Hebrew Chanting through the Ages and around the World

Some of the psalms were probably used as part of the liturgy (i.e.,

4. The video was created by the author with assistance from Alex McGrath, using Bob MacDonald's music files.

the official order of service) in the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was above all else a place for animal sacrifice, and the conviction that this form of worship could only be appropriately offered in the Jerusalem temple led to the development of synagogues—places where the focus is the reading or chanting of Scripture and the offering of prayer. A [cycle of readings](#) developed to take those in attendance through the Torah and other parts of Scripture every year. Those who engage in the act of chanting Scripture in communal worship consistently describe it as an exhilarating privilege and a daunting responsibility. The combination of singing in a language that is not their own (even speakers of modern Hebrew can find biblical vocabulary and expressions a challenge) and remembering the way the cantillation marks (often referred to today as “trop” or “trope”) are to be interpreted can be challenging, even for those who do this professionally and regularly.⁵ You will find some who think that complex forms of chanting distract from the meaning of the words, while others find that the musical aspect makes the impact more powerful, even if the words become less clear.

Listen to some examples of Hebrew chanting from the Jewish tradition from different parts of the world. Consider this one from Morocco, performed by Cantor Haim Louk.⁶ It is heavily ornamented with flourishes, but the underlying melody is not as far from the previous less ornate examples as it might first appear.



5. See some of the quotes from interviewees in Jeffrey A. Summit, *Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131–34, 140–42.

6. Shared on YouTube by the channel תהלים באתר הפיוט והתפילה.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-4>

Here is Deuteronomy 6:4 (a text known as the Shema) sung by [Azi Schwartz](#), senior cantor at [Park Avenue Synagogue](#) in New York City.⁷



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-5>

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and other branches of the Jewish tradition have different musical styles, as do the regional traditions of Sephardi Jews (those in and from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East) and Ashkenazi Jews (historically located in most of Europe). The chanting style changes for certain occasions, such as the festivals known as the High Holy Days. We can only provide the briefest of introductions to these rich and diverse traditions. Here is Rabbi Angela Buchdahl singing Psalm 23 at Central Synagogue in New York City.⁸

7. Shared by [Cantor Azi Schwartz](#) on his [YouTube channel](#). The recording is from the eve of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, 2015.

8. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl sings a setting of Psalm 23 composed by



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-6>

Sometimes music brings people together across differences, as we see in the fact that the aforementioned two singers from Conservative and Reform synagogues in New York have joined forces to perform music. Here is Psalm 146, written by Cantor [Benjie Ellen Schiller](#), performed by cantors Schwartz and Buchdahl together.⁹



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=30#oembed-7>

On the ongoing contemporary practice within Judaism, Cantor Giora Sharon has this to say about the role of music in synagogue worship:

As a cantor in synagogues for forty-eight years, I witnessed the effect of song and music on the praying congregation.

Gerald Cohen at Central Synagogue. Shared by Central Synagogue on their YouTube channel.

9. This setting of Psalm 146 is composed by Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller. Piano accompaniment by Colin Fowler. Shared by Park Avenue Synagogue on their YouTube channel.

Music, as a universal language, speaks to everyone, and everyone understands it.

In Hebrew we call this *Hidur Mitzvah*; it means the beautification of the commandments. It includes the presentation of the prayers to God in the most beautiful way. This is my mission as a cantor, prayer leader, and the delegate of the congregation (in Hebrew, *Shaliach Tzibur*). This was my calling since my early childhood.¹⁰

There is no one way of chanting Scripture, even in the same religion. Culture and tradition vary, and that will be relevant to keep in mind as we explore this topic further in the next chapter. Before proceeding, however, we should emphasize that chanting in these liturgical styles was and is not the only form of Jewish musical expression when it comes to exploring biblical texts musically. You may wish to read about Salamone Rossi by jumping to chapter 24 now rather than waiting until later. It's up to you!

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3. Chanting in Churches

In this chapter you will

- learn about chanting in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity
- discover why the custom may have arisen to chant the Bible rather than simply read it
- explore how you can use chanting as a first step toward making vocal music yourself

Rather than only reading about chanting, it will enhance your learning if you actually do it. Don't worry if you have never done anything like this before. Feel free to consult a tutorial and aim for something authentic from a particular tradition, or just place pitch on your speaking of words from some biblical text. In other words, don't just say the words; sing them. Do it all on the same note to begin with. Then try changing up the ending to make it more interesting. If you are nervous, do this where no one else can hear you. The point is not to do it in some way that is evaluated as correct but simply to do it. Just as there are things that you cannot learn about driving without getting behind the wheel of a car, there are things that you cannot learn about music without actually making music.

When it comes to the official approach to chanting in one major stream of Christianity, Roman Catholicism, you can find many [tutorials](#) online, like on YouTube, that explain what to do and how

to do it.¹ If you take the time to explore what is available online, you will hear and see differences among them. They reflect a wide array of chanting traditions, some of which you may have heard of, and others of which may be unfamiliar to you. Many people have heard of [plainsong](#) or Gregorian chant, for instance—a historic part of the Catholic tradition characterized by unaccompanied singing in unison. More than one [website](#) is dedicated to explaining how musical phrases were notated in that tradition before the modern system of writing music developed. Another site does the same for the Byzantine chant, which is the tradition in Eastern Orthodox churches, explaining its [history](#) and its [system of notation](#). There is significant diversity of styles across different denominations and different regions, to which we cannot do justice here. Nevertheless, the very act of chanting Scripture reflects a shared heritage. As we trace this back further still, it is important not to let the treatment of chanting in Judaism and Christianity in two chapters obscure the fact that the very practice of chanting Scripture is something shared in common, even if styles of chanting differ between Judaism and Christianity as well as within each of those traditions depending on location and culture. As mentioned in previous chapters, Christianity emerged out of Judaism. While Christianity often took things in a distinctive direction as it grew into a separate world religion, it is important to recognize the shared roots and origins in addition to the differences.

Why did people start chanting the Scriptures instead of merely reading them? There are undoubtedly a number of reasons. One is that some of the Bible, especially the Psalms, started as song and then took on the status of Scripture. In other words, some of Scripture was sung before it was written. If some of Scripture could be sung, why not the rest? Treating the text in this special way

1. The [website of Corpus Christi Watershed](#) shared a video along with additional tutorial materials and other information that may be useful and of interest.

highlighted its significance. You might say it put a “halo of sound” around the words, much as a halo was traditionally added to a saint in paintings. Singing also helps project the sound, and as gatherings of worshipers became larger and larger, it became more difficult and, at the same time, more important to be heard. One thing that many people do not realize is that [the same skills you need to sing](#) are the ones you need to [speak publicly](#). Using your voice properly in both ways has a lot in common. Varying pitch is important (you’ve undoubtedly heard someone speak in monotone). Supporting your speech with deep breaths and good support from the diaphragm matters in both. Using the resonance in one’s head rather than pressure on the vocal cords to generate a powerful sound is crucial in both as well. You may have had a teacher who spoke in a singsong voice. They had learned to use their voice in a way that was more interesting and intelligible to the listener and less tiring for the speaker.

I mention this because many who read this book have little or no interest in singing. But most people need to use their voices for work purposes daily and can suffer fatigue or worse as a result of not using their voice properly. Speaking, singing, chanting, or doing anything else with one’s voice is a learned skill. Some people may have bodies that resonate in ways that generate sounds that are highly appreciated, but they still learned to use their voices well. In some cases, people started learning this skill so early that by the time anyone heard them, they assumed it was “natural talent.” Not everyone sounds the same, but making sound with your voice is important to us all, and making music—even if only at a very basic level—is better than not doing so at all. Being a little bit healthy is better than being completely unhealthy. Being a little bit informed is (in most cases) better than being completely uninformed. Don’t just read this book about music. When moments arise when it is natural to do so, sing along!

Before moving on, it would be unfortunate if we left readers with the impression that ancient music that engaged with the Bible only chanted the words of biblical texts. Far from it. An important

example is Hildegard of Bingen, and you may want to jump to chapter 23 now before proceeding further.

For Further Reading

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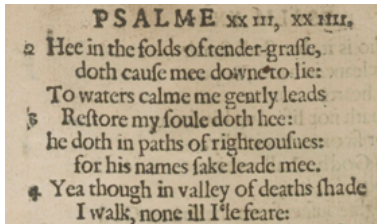
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4. The Protestant Reformation and Metrical Psalms

In this chapter you will

- explore the musical impact of the Protestant Reformation
- learn about the Bible and music in early colonial North America
- discover what meter is and how it allows the same words to be sung to different melodies
- create your own adaptation of a biblical text to a standard meter that can then be sung to a familiar tune



The beginning of Psalm 23 in the Bay Psalm Book. [The Whole Booke of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre](#), from American Imprints Collection, [Rare Book and Special Collections Division](#), Library of Congress, is in the public domain.

Do you know [the first book printed in colonial North America](#)? It was a collection of psalms known as the Bay Psalm Book. This tells us something about the centrality of the Psalms in the Protestant worship that these European colonists engaged in. The book was a collection of metrical psalms, meaning that the biblical psalms were translated

not merely from the original Hebrew into English but into English verses that followed a regular meter. Meter in this context means a regular pattern of numbers of syllables and rhythms. Meter is not just a number of syllables; it also has to do with where the emphasis falls in words. That is why even though the tune “Yankee Doodle” has the same number of syllables in each line as the melody you know as “Amazing Grace,” you cannot sing the words of one of them to the other melody and have it sound right and natural. The melody traditionally used for “Amazing Grace” is in what is known as common meter, so called because it was and is so widely used. It consists of groups of four lines that alternate between eight and six syllables. You may see this abbreviated in metrical psalm collections as CM (for common meter) or 8.6.8.6, indicating the actual meter.

The fact that the Bay Psalm Book was the first book to be printed in the American colonies tells us something. So too does the fact that a [printing press](#) was set up at such an early point. These facts together highlight some important things one can learn

The slogan *sola scriptura* means “scripture alone.” This became a key slogan of the Protestant Reformation, emphasizing the Bible as ultimate (even if in practice never the *only*) authority.

about the Protestant Reformation at the intersection of the Bible

and music. You definitely will want to explore these things further if you are interested in this topic, and just as there are many [copies](#) of and [exhibits](#) about the [Bay Psalm Book](#) online, there are [many introductions](#) to the [Protestant Reformation](#). In this context, we can sum up a few major points. One is an emphasis on individual Christians reading the Bible. English translations of the Bible are so numerous and widespread, and the act of reading it so common, that it can be hard to imagine a world without those things. The printing press was a major innovation around the time of the Protestant Reformation that made it possible and dovetailed into its emphases. Just as individual Christians should, according to Protestants, take responsibility for reading and interpreting the Bible, so too worship became more participatory, with all believers having the same access to God in prayer without a need for other human mediators and everyone joining together in song. Put these emphases together, and the composition of singable songs derived from Scripture is a natural direction to take things. In the seventeenth century, the English Puritan minister [Thomas Ford](#) [called the singing of psalms a “Christian duty.”](#)¹

The *Bay Psalm Book* is in the public domain (not surprising given its age), and so it can be [read online](#) in a [variety](#) of [places](#), including [Google Books](#). You will undoubtedly find aspects of such an old book difficult to read, but at least [take a peek inside](#).

1. Thomas Ford, [Singing of Psalmes the duty of Christians under the New Testament, or a vindication of that Gospel ordinance in V. sermons upon Ephesians 5. 19](#) (London: W. B., 1659).

In order to adapt the psalms to a regular meter, it is inevitably necessary to paraphrase them at least somewhat. Some settings diverge more significantly from the source material than others. That's the thing about translation and paraphrase: the one blurs into the other. No translation is without interpretation, and every genuine paraphrase remains connected to the meaning of the original. They represent a spectrum rather than two distinct and separate categories. Two settings by the famous hymnwriter [Isaac Watts](#) provide an example of how the same psalm might be rendered into metered English in two significantly different ways. Here are two renderings of [Psalm 100](#), which he calls a “plain translation” and a “paraphrase,” respectively.

PSALM C. Second Metre. . A Paraphrase.

1 SING to the Lord with joyful voice;	let ev'ry land his name adore;
The British isles shall send the noise	across the ocean to the shore.
2 Nations, attend before his throne	with solemn fear, with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone;	he can create, and he destroy.
3 His sov'reign pow'r, without our aid,	made us of clay, and form'd us men;
And when like wand'ring sheep we stray'd,	he brought us to his fold again.
4 We are his people, we his care,	our souls and all our mortal frame;
What lasting honours shall we rear,	Almighty Maker, to thy name!
5 We'll send thy gates with thankful songs;	high as the heav'n our voices raise;
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues,	shall fill thy courts with sounding praise.
6 Wide as the world is thy command!	vast as eternity thy love;
Firm as a rock thy truth must stand,	when rolling years shall cease to move.

Image from Psalms and Hymns, imitated in the language of the New Testament. [Psalms and Hymns, imitated in the language of the New Testament, p. 75](#), by Isaac Watts, is in the public domain.

Two Renderings of Psalm 100 in Metrical Form by Isaac Watts

Psalm 100. A Plain Translation

Ye nations round the earth, rejoice
 Before the Lord, your sovereign King;
 Serve him with cheerful heart and voice,
 With all your tongues his glory sing.

The Lord is God; 'tis he alone
 Doth life, and breath, and being give;
 We are his work, and not our own,
 The sheep that on his pastures live.

Enter his gates with songs of joy,
With praises to his courts repair;
And make it your divine employ
To pay your thanks and honors there.

The Lord is good, the Lord is kind,
Great is his grace, his mercy sure;
And the whole race of man shall find
His truth from age to age endure.

Psalm 100. A Paraphrase

Sing to the Lord with joyful voice,
Let every land his name adore;
The British isles shall send the noise
Across the ocean to the shore.

Nations, attend before his throne
With solemn fear, with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone;
He can create and he destroy.

His sovereign power, without our aid,
Made us of clay and formed us men;
And when, like wand'ring sheep, we strayed,
He brought us to his fold again.

We are his people, we his care,
Our souls and all our mortal frame:
What lasting honors shall we rear,
Almighty Maker, to thy name?

We'll crowd thy gates with thankful songs,
High as the heav'ns our voices raise;

And earth with her ten thousand tongues
Shall fill thy courts with sounding praise.

Wide as the world is thy command,
Vast as eternity thy love!
Firm as a rock thy truth must stand,
When rolling years shall cease to move.

Another famous setting of Psalm 100 has become known as “Old Hundredth” because it is one of the very early metrical settings of Psalm 100 (written by [Louis Bourgeois](#) in Geneva for use in Reformer John Calvin’s church), and its melody continues to be used to this day. There are many recordings of the psalm, including [instrumental ones that you can sing along with](#). Here is a recording by the Harvard University Choir, conducted by Edward Elwyn.² The choir is accompanied by organ, which is how you will often hear it performed as well as sung in churches.



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded
from this version of the text. You can view them online*

here: [https://pressbooks.palni.org/
thebibleandmusic/?p=32#oembed-1](https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=32#oembed-1)

You will also find that some of these melodies have been arranged by famous composers (in this case, [Ralph Vaughan](#)

2. The recording is shared by Memorial Church Harvard on their YouTube channel.

[Williams](#) is an example) and that others may appear woven into other musical works. That's not something we'll explore here, but you may wish to if you haven't had enough of this music or want to see how it has been influential beyond the boundaries of religious communities. In at least one famous instance, a melody originally composed for use with metrical psalms has become more closely associated with other words: many know the tune "Old Hundreth" as the music to which they sing words known as the "[Doxology](#)."³

Next you should try to participate in the singing and then the creation of metrical psalms yourself. Begin by singing along with some metrical psalms where the words and music are provided. Eventually, try adapting words from the Bible to a melody that you like, but start by finding a

**Some Reformed/
Presbyterian churches
practice exclusive psalmody,
meaning they consider
Psalms to be the only
biblically authorized words
for Christians to sing in
worship.**

metrical psalm that already exists with words you like and then see if you can find a melody that suits it. Below I suggest some pairings of what may be familiar melodies with metrical psalms, but my musical tastes may not be yours, so look for ones that make sense for you. You can often find an instrumental karaoke track on YouTube to sing along with! Here are some suggestions:

[Psalm 2](#) to the [melody](#) of "[America the Beautiful](#)"

[Psalm 42](#) to the tune of the [Gilligan's Island](#) theme

[Psalm 113](#) to the melody of "[House of the Rising Sun](#)"

There are lots of different melodies that you already know that have a regular meter and thus to which it will be straightforward to sing any number of metrical psalms. There are

3. For those familiar with it or interested, [the origins of the words for the Doxology can be traced to the hymnwriting career of Thomas Ken.](#)

[free metrical](#) psalm lyrics [online](#), many being in the public domain, such as the [Scottish Metrical Psalter of 1650](#). Metrical psalms also continue to be created, and there are recently published compilations that can be purchased. What happens when you sing an arrangement of a psalm to a tune you already know? What is the experience like? How does doing this influence your perception of the words and the music? Compare several different metrical arrangements of the same psalm. How do they convey the meaning of the original psalm in different ways? How much do they differ, and how much remains the same despite those differences?

For the record, [the first printed book that we know for certain was published in the Americas was printed in Mexico](#). There is also very interesting early music from that era reflecting the Catholic tradition of the Spanish colonizers that draws on the Bible and more specifically the Psalms, with Hernando Franco's "Circumdederunt Me" as one of the very first. Here is a performance by the Coro Melos Gloríae, conducted by Juan Manuel Lara Cárdena.⁴



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=32#oembed-2>

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4. Shared by Enrique Guerrero on his Early Latin American Music YouTube channel.

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5. Spirituals

In this chapter you will

- learn about the music that was created by African slaves and their descendants
- discover the Bible's potential to inspire hope and efforts for freedom (and what measures slave owners took to try to avoid this)
- explore the ongoing influence of this musical tradition

The [genre](#) of [spirituals](#) (sometimes referred to in the past as “[negro spirituals](#)”) had a profound influence on American music and the world, as musical traditions from Africa merged with biblical texts and other elements acquired in and from the place where Africans were brought as slaves, creating a style of music that influenced blues and jazz and, from there, rock and many other genres. Biblical elements are featured frequently, sometimes subtly and through allusions and at other times as many details of a story are explored and retold. For an example of a specific story given significant attention, [listen to “Go Down Moses \(Let My People Go\)”](#). It stays very close to the story in Exodus throughout, yet it speaks at the very same time to and out of the experience of slavery in another time and place. It is hard to imagine a clearer example than this of the way an ancient text, modern experience, and musical expression can converge in powerful and meaningful ways.

One of the oldest documented spirituals, “Roll, Jordan, Roll,”

focused on John the Baptist, and we know quite a bit about its history. It is an adaptation of a hymn by famous hymnwriter Isaac Watts. [The song is featured in the 2013 movie 12 Years a Slave](#), and in this video clip from the film, it is performed by Topsy Chapman with Chiwetel Ejiofor and other cast members.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=33#oembed-1>

The [River Jordan](#) is one of many motifs related to water that appears frequently in spirituals, often [echoing multiple different texts pertaining to the exodus, baptism, and more](#). “Wade in the Water” is a good example, echoing not only the crossing of the Red Sea but also the troubling of the waters in John 5:7, while at the same time [providing instructions for how to use water as a means of evading recapture when escaping slavery](#).¹ This 2019 recording of “Wade in the Water” by Cynthia Liggins Thomas incorporates a 1925 recording of a performance by the Sunset Four Jubilee Singers.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=33#oembed-2>

1. See further Henry Carrigan, *Fifteen Spirituals That Will Change Your Life* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2019), 25–31.

This excerpt from an [episode of History Detectives, “Slave Songbook: Origin of the Negro Spiritual.”](#) will delve more into their history.²



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=33#oembed-3>

Whole websites are dedicated to documenting and studying this important musical genre, such as the [Spirituals Database](#). Don't forget as well that we started the book with an example of a spiritual, “Dry Bones.”³ Let us conclude this chapter by mentioning another famous spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The chariot that is in mind appears to be the divine chariot that carried [the prophet Elijah](#) away to heaven ([2 Kings 2:11](#)). The song is widely familiar, and in the UK it has become customary for the crowds to sing it at sporting events. [Here is the reggae group UB40 performing it with that specific focus.](#)

Spirituals continue to be performed and interpreted today. Historically, they brought together musical traditions that enslaved Africans brought with them and music they encountered in the lands to which they were brought. The spirituals influenced many new genres that emerged out of this fusion of musical influences in the Americas, including the blues, jazz, and rock 'n' roll. Spirituals

2. History Detectives, season 6, episode 11, “Slave Songbook: Origin of the Negro Spiritual,” aired February 3, 2009, on PBS.
3. For another version of “Dry Bones,” listen to the [arrangement by Margaret Bonds](#) as part of her 1946 work “Five Creek-Freedmen Spirituals.”

also drew on and engaged with texts that were in most cases new to the slaves. The Bible was used by slave owners to justify the practice of slavery, but the slaves found in it a resource that could foster their longing for freedom and hope for liberation. The Bible's potential to have this impact was something the European American slave owners were aware of, and thus they [printed Bibles for slaves](#) that [omitted key passages](#) about [liberation from slavery](#).

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6. Contemporary Christian Music

In this chapter you will

- explore the way the Bible is used and interpreted in this modern genre of Christian music
- consider the different ways the Bible may function in relation to music that is primarily for use in communal singing versus music created to be performed and listened to

Music of Many Labels: Praise Worship / Contemporary Christian Music

There are abundant allusions to the Bible in contemporary Christian music (CCM), both the songs written for use in communal singing in churches and those written to be performed by a particular band or artist. These two categories blur into one another, as often songs that are heard on the radio in the first instance are then learned and embraced by congregations. A close examination of these songs provides examples of how the Bible is understood, received, and interpreted within the contexts that produce and utilize that music. Most (but not quite all) of this music is produced by Evangelical

Protestants, and the role the Bible plays in these songs provides a window into that tradition and its emphases. See, for example, the thoughts on this topic shared by famous British songwriter Graham Kendrick. He suggests that singing songs is the closest many Christians come to memorization of Scripture and that there is a need for new “Scripture songs” as well as songs based on biblical stories and characters.¹ Artists like [Michael Card](#) have sought to offer albums that do precisely that—in his case, including a trilogy on the life of Christ, separate albums that explore individual New Testament Gospels through songs based on their contents, and albums based on the Pentateuch and the Prophets, as well as many other songs that not merely echo Scripture in a vague way but offer either a focused retelling or at least enough specific content that someone with familiarity with the relevant biblical stories will easily make the connections.

El Shaddai

The song “El Shaddai” can serve as a good example from among the many just alluded to. Michael Card wrote this song, although it is most famous in the rendition performed by Amy Grant. The title is a transliteration of one of the ways that God is referred to in the Hebrew Bible.² In the first verse, one finds references

1. Graham Kendrick, “Worship in Spirit and in Truth,” in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 86–103 (here 95–97, 101).
2. The attempt to include another Hebrew phrase does not succeed in the same way, with something becoming garbled in the process, since “Erkamka na Adonai” is not a meaningful Hebrew phrase. On this, see the helpful discussion by [Claude Mariottini](#).

to the stories of the binding of Isaac, the exodus, and Hagar and Ishmael.³ A songwriter must make decisions about what to include when summing up a longer story in a song (or alluding to biblical material in part of a song). The need for rhyme is often a significant consideration and may impact not only word choice but order. The results of those choices deserve close examination. In this case, we may observe that reference is made to the saving of the son of Abraham (i.e., Isaac) through a combination of God's love and a ram. In the story in Genesis thus alluded to, we encounter the first mention of "love" in the Bible, and it is Abraham's love for his son that is in view ([Genesis 22:2](#)).⁴ In Genesis, God is the one who demands the sacrifice of Isaac, and thus referring only to the "rescue" of Abraham's son leaves more troubling aspects of the story to one side. The same happens in some treatments of the Noah story, in which the focus is on God as the one who rescues from the flood and not God as the one who sends the flood. Returning to "El Shaddai," God is also the one who sees the outcast, which is an allusion to the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. Just as Abraham is the first person said to love in the Bible, Hagar is the first to name God, calling God "the God who sees me." The Hebrew phrase is often transliterated into English characters as "El-roi," and despite the mention of [Genesis 16:13](#), this name for God is not featured in the transliterated form in the song.

3. Each of these is the focus of a complete chapter elsewhere in the present book.
4. Wendy Zierler, "[In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah](#)," in "Jewish Women's Spirituality," special issue, *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 9, no. 5765 (2005): 19–20.

Songs from the Book of Job

The song ["Blessed Be Your Name"](#) was written by Matt and Beth Redman in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, although [it reflects a broader experience of suffering](#) than that one event. They realized that there was a dearth of songs that could be used to express grief in a manner appropriate to such an occasion.⁵ They unsurprisingly drew inspiration for the song from the book of Job, which explores an instance of undeserved suffering. Job's suffering is compounded by the theological commentary offered by his friends, who assume that since God is just, Job and/or his children must have done something to deserve the misfortune that had befallen them. The reader of the book, however, knows better, being shown a glimpse of the heavenly court in which God boasts about Job's impressive righteousness. [The song takes words from Job 1:21](#) not only for the chorus but also for the bridge, which addresses God rather than speaking in the third person but nonetheless refers, like its source material, to God as the one who gives and takes away. An important question to ask is whether that affirmation by Job is reinforced or negated by what follows in the dialogues, in which Job seems far less willing to simply assert that whatever God does is to be accepted, insisting that there ought to be some opportunity to bring charges against God in circumstances like his so that the righteous sufferer might not be made to experience additional pain at the loss of their good reputation in the eyes of those who believe suffering must correlate with wrongdoing.

Relatively few songs draw from the main body of the book of Job, the dialogues between Job and his three friends. Those that do often simply borrow language with little connection to the

5. Matt and Beth Redman, *Blessed Be Your Name: Worshipping God on the Road Marked with Suffering* (Ventura: Regal, 2008), 34.

context, as in the case of the song “My Redeemer Lives” by Hillsong, which reflects a long history of interpretation of those words from [Job 19:25](#) in a manner that is disconnected from its original context. Within the book of Job, Job explicitly denies that an afterlife exists that will resolve the problem of his suffering. That has not kept Christian readers from treating the reference as though it were to Jesus and his resurrection, with the following verse (Job 19:26) supposedly an affirmation by Job of his expectation of his own resurrection. Nicole C. Mullen, on the other hand, in her song [“Redeemer.”](#) offers a treatment of the words that is more closely linked to the overall arc of the book, bringing in creation, although ultimately she too reads Jesus’s resurrection into the phrase.

[Laura Story’s](#) song [“Indescribable”](#) is most famous in the [version recorded by Chris Tomlin](#). It draws from the theophany (God’s appearance) near the end of the book of Job. There are a wide range of interpretations of the significance of that moment in the story. Some understand God to be showing off the greatness of the divine power, which is supposed to awe Job and everyone else into quiet humble submission. Norman Habel offers a different interpretation.⁶ Habel is an Old Testament scholar who is himself also a songwriter, as we see in chapter 7 on creation. He notes that the book of Job falls into the category of Wisdom literature, one of the distinctive characteristics of which is that it does not appeal to divine revelation but instead focuses on things that are universally accessible—in particular, observation of the natural world. Habel thus thinks the author of the book is being ironic in having God appear in a work in this genre only to talk about the weather and animals. It is also interesting and important to reflect on how much more we know about snow, lightning, and other natural phenomena mentioned in this part of the book of Job. If Habel’s interpretation is right, the point is not to cower in response to impressive power

6. See his discussion in Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster, 1985).

but to recognize that our observations of the natural world do not lead to nice, neat theological packages. When the mountain lion is fed, the young deer becomes food. As Jesus would later emphasize, rain falls upon the just and the unjust ([Matthew 5:45](#)). Observation of the natural world shows how hard it is to make sense of life in our cosmos, yet some insist that it leads to clear theological and ethical conclusions. The song captures very nicely the emphasis in the book of Job (according to Habel's interpretation) on how observation of nature should lead to humility before God. If the cosmos has puzzles and loose ends that elude our attempts to solve and resolve them, how much more the Creator thereof?

On the other hand, those who sing the song should not do so uncritically, any more than those who read the book apart from any musical treatment should read it without giving due thought to our very different perspectives. We understand weather differently and thus do not believe there are literal "storehouses laden with snow" (as the song says, echoing Job 38:22). Understanding modern meteorology allows us an alternative to believing that God "tells every lightning bolt where it should go." This can be extremely helpful for those wrestling with their sense of undeserved suffering, like Job's, when it is due to the impact of storms, tornados, and other weather phenomena. A song like "God of Wonders" (written by Steve Hindalong and Marc Byrd) can also prompt this sort of reflection. The heavens are said to be God's tabernacle, drawing on biblical imagery. Yet God is also said to be "beyond our galaxy," introducing astronomical knowledge available to us but not to any of the biblical authors, none of whom was aware of or mentions galaxies or a universe. Preserving the biblical image of God "above the heavens" ([Psalm 57:5, 11](#)) situates God much farther away than the same language would have implied for ancient people. (Consider as well the similar imagery in the worship song "Be Exalted O God," written by Brent Chambers, which draws on that and other psalms.) Interestingly, it is Job's friend Zophar who mentions that the deep things of God are "higher than the heavens" and thus unfathomable to mortals ([Job 11:8](#)). That idea is in keeping with the overall

emphasis of the book of Job, yet what Zophar does with that true principle leads to him and his friends being condemned for not speaking rightly about God as Job does in the very act of complaining and asserting his innocence ([Job 42:7](#)). Perhaps above all else, the book of Job emphasizes the need to use the wisdom of ancient Israel's Wisdom tradition wisely. As [Proverbs 26:9](#) emphasizes, a wise saying can be used in an unwise manner. The lyrics of songs often become the proverbs of our time, from which phrases are repeated in sermons, in individual moments of crisis, and in many other contexts. Reflecting on the different musical treatments of the book of Job as well as the literary and theological significance of that book is likely to lead to a more nuanced and richer appreciation of the theology of suffering, contemporary religious music, and the Bible.

For Further Reading

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PART II

TEXTS

When surveying the setting of biblical texts to music, it is useful to approach the subject matter in multiple ways. One, which will be our focus here in part 2, is to look at specific texts, often comparing the different ways a particular text was set to music by different composers in different times, traditions, and circumstances. Another, which will be our focus in part 3, is to consider a particular composer or songwriter and discuss their influences, their distinctive style, the various texts they chose to set, and other such things in the context of their creative work as a whole. Each provides important insights and deserves attention.

7. Creation

In this chapter you will

- explore connections between the depictions of God creating in Genesis 1–3 and human creative activity
- learn how translations and historical contextual background information are relevant to interpreting the Bible
- listen to musical examples that explore creation in Genesis in very different ways

The creation accounts in Genesis can provide a helpful jumping-off point for reflection on creativity and what it means to create. So too can the study of music. When the creation accounts are set to music and one examines the ways these texts have been explored in musical settings, the possibilities for thinking about creation and creativity are multiplied.¹

1. Composer James MacMillan notes the connections between creation in the Bible and the compositional activity he himself engages in. See his essay James MacMillan, “God, Theology, and Music,” in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 35–50 (here 44).

Multiple Creation Stories (within and before the Bible)

One thing that both music and accounts of creation each raise separately, but that are highlighted and become the focus differently when these are explored together, is the question of what it means to create. Those who have not studied the Bible in an academic context before may not be aware that [there is more than one creation story in Genesis 1–3](#), and allusions are made to even older ideas about creation in other texts. As with the music in the Bible, it is useful to begin with the context and the broader world of ancient Near Eastern ideas about creation before narrowing our attention to the biblical materials and their musical settings.

One important text that provides crucial background and contextual information is the [Mesopotamian](#) epic known as the [Enuma Elish](#). It is named the same way the books of the Bible are in the Jewish tradition, for the first words—in this case, “When on high.” The book we call Genesis is known in Hebrew as *Bereshit*, or “In the beginning.” You can [read an English translation of the text of the Enuma Elish online](#), or if you prefer, you can [listen to the Enuma Elish being read in English translation](#). Given our focus on music here, it is worth noting that [composer Carl Vine has set this Babylonian text to music](#). You may enjoy giving that a listen as well, even though this is a setting of a text that is not in the Bible but something older than the Bible that provides relevant context for understanding it.

Translations and Interpreting Creation

Turning our attention to Genesis, an interpretive question comes

up immediately in the very first word in Hebrew. If you compare English translations, you will find that some say something like this:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void... ([NRSV](#))

The updated edition of the New Revised Standard Version renders it like this:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos... ([NRSVUE](#))

Others say something along these lines:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty... ([NIV](#))

The difference is subtle but significant. The first, which linguists consider the best rendering, conveys that this is the start of a creative activity that fashions something out of the already existing earth, which is in a state of chaos and disorder. The second, which is found in many older as well as some conservative modern translations, conveys the idea that creation is an absolute beginning, taking place “out of nothing” (sometimes discussed using the Latin phrase for this, *creatio ex nihilo*). The former understanding represents a point of commonality with the Enuma Elish: there is no discussion of where the raw materials come from, just what is made from them.

This is not only important for understanding the theological outlook of the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3. It also

relates to musical creation. Those who create music use sounds and pitches that already exist. Those who create new musical instruments and sounds begin with things that existed already, even if they modify them in very substantial ways. Just as you do not need to invent a language or a new mode of writing when producing text, so too composing music almost always means using a musical language that already exists. One can speak without writing, as was true of most or all of the New Testament authors. Paul was the author of the letter to the church in Rome that we know as the “Epistle to the Romans.” He was not, however, the *writer*. That was someone named Tertius, who adds his greetings in [Romans 16:22](#). In ancient times, many people made music, but even fewer wrote it down in some form of notation than do so today. This is important, because we sometimes feel inadequate if we cannot read and write, whether words or music. Creativity does not depend on the ability to transcribe what one creates. If you can make sounds—whether using your voice, an instrument, or an app—then you can create music, just as is true with creating meaningful communication in the form of words. Of course, training is important in both areas to develop and improve our skills. But these points are worth emphasizing, since many do not explore their potential as creators of music because they think that a high level of training is required. Speaking even a little of a second or third language is worthwhile. Making music at a basic level has value.

Beginning in the Beginning

How does one start a piece of music that is based in Genesis 1? Does it begin with chaos or silence? When the music begins, does it do so loudly or [gently](#)? Does the beginning of the music represent the first words in the text or the beginning of creation itself? Different composers do different things. The [text](#) (also called a [libretto](#)) of one famous work that may come to mind, [Die Schöpfung](#) (*The Creation*)

by [Joseph Haydn](#), is based on Genesis but also draws on other sources and includes words not in Genesis. As we saw in the last chapter, the boundary between translation and paraphrase is a blurry one, although most of the time we can genuinely place a rendition into one category or the other. In this case, it is clear that we are dealing with both words that are in Genesis and words that are not. Haydn's setting features angels and elaborates more on the romance between Adam and Eve. It is nevertheless definitely worth [listening to this piece](#) if you can find the time, even though it will take you more than an hour and a half to do so!²

Genesis can help us think about creativity and originality in many ways. Some theologians have suggested that the primary aspect of human beings bearing “the image and likeness of God” (as [Genesis 1:26–27](#) puts it) is that we are ourselves creators, sometimes even envisaged as being “co-creators” along with God. One can see this idea in several places in Genesis 1–2: humans rule over the earth and subdue it much as God subdued the chaotic waters, and humans tend the garden that God got started. Musical creativity, as already noted, involves working with preexisting materials. Even in this regard, there are different levels and kinds of originality. One

2. Those with even a little music theory will appreciate his use of [unresolved chords](#) to convey the primordial chaos. The example of Haydn's *Creation* also provides an opportunity to explore subjects like the [Enlightenment context](#) of religion in that era and its impact on and expression in music. Also worth mentioning is that Haydn wove a phrase from *Die Schöpfung* into one of his masses, which became known as the *Schöpfungsmesse* for that reason. Since the musical phrase was a melody from the love duet between Adam and Eve in the earlier work, the Habsburg empress Marie Therese (Haydn's patron) demanded that Haydn rework that part of the mass in her copy of it. On this, see further Daniel Heartz, [Mozart, Haydn and Early Beethoven, 1781–1802](#) (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 652–53.

can write a song or perform a song someone else has written (a “cover version”). In between, one can do one’s own rendition of a song that develops it in new ways. A good biblical example of this is the song “Turn, Turn, Turn,” almost all of [the words of which are from the book of Ecclesiastes](#). [Pete Seeger](#) wrote it, but [the song was made famous by the Byrds](#), whose version is noticeably different in important ways, yet we still rightly consider it to be the same song.³ Different again, yet still the same song, is [Nina Simone’s cover version](#).

It is important to give credit to one’s source material, however much one reworks it, so that one avoids plagiarism. Yet many lawsuits have wrestled with the problem that originality in music is a spectrum. The same chord progressions occur in a wide array of different songs. The Genesis 1 creation account is itself based on earlier creation stories, as we have already seen. Yet no one would deny that it is highly original in many respects. As one explores one’s own creativity, it is natural to begin by copying what one sees others doing and only later develop anything that might be considered a distinctive style. If you are being musically creative for the first time, expect this and do not set yourself unrealistic expectations regarding how “original” your early efforts are.

Two Examples from the Twentieth Century

[American composer Aaron Copland](#) set words from Genesis to

3. There is a [live performance by Seeger together with Judy Collins](#) in which he talks about a topic of creation that a musician could easily neglect—namely, who made the instrument they play. For another example of music with text from Ecclesiastes, see [Jean Berger’s “Two Songs from Ecclesiastes.”](#)

music. Here is his “In the Beginning,” performed by San Diego Pro Arte Voices.⁴



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=37#oembed-1>

His choice of where to end is interesting, since most scholars of the Bible view Genesis 2:3 or perhaps 2:4 as the end of the account of creation in a week, after which another story, which perhaps had its own separate compositional history, begins. Copland ends with 2:7, God breathing life into the human being that God has created so that (as the King James Version puts it, the translation Copland worked with) the human being “became a living soul.” If you are interested in reading more about this work, [Honey Meconi](#) provides additional information about the background of the piece as well as how Copland uses music to explore and reinforce the meaning of the text.⁵

The collaborative work from the middle of the twentieth century known as the *Genesis Suite* may help us think about the long-puzzling “let us” in the account of God creating human beings. Is creation collaborative? Who was involved in the process depicted in Genesis and in what ways? How much do human creative products owe to others, both those explicitly mentioned and

4. Shared by the performers, San Diego Pro Arte Voices, on their YouTube channel.
5. Copland’s only other setting of biblical texts is his student work [Four Motets](#), which he only reluctantly agreed to have [published](#) decades after he composed them.

perhaps listed as co-authors and also far more influences and supporters than anyone is likely to consciously call to mind? In the *Genesis Suite*, seven composers (Arnold Schoenberg, Nathaniel Shilkret, Aleksander Tansman, Darius Milhaud, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Ernst Toch, and Igor Stravinsky) created music to accompany the text of the early chapters of Genesis. Here is a performance of the work by the Janssen Symphony Orchestra of Los Angeles conducted by Werner Janssen, with chorus directed by Hugo Strelitzer. The recording is from December 1945 and was made less than a month after the work's premiere.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=37#oembed-2>

You can read more about the [Genesis Suite on the Milken Archive website](#). Other instrumental explorations of the creation story include [Darius Milhaud's "La Création du Monde"](#) and [Andrei Petrov's ballet suite "The Creation of the World."](#) [Duke Ellington's "In the Beginning, God"](#) (part of his *Sacred Concerts*) also deserves a mention for its rather free jazz exploration. However many examples you listen to, you will undoubtedly find that it leads to greater appreciation of both the texts and the music if you reflect on and compare the choices made by composers, the different moods of the pieces, how the meaning and structure of the text is or is not reflected in the musical setting, and other similarities and differences you notice.⁶

6. There is also a fascinating story that intersects with multiple subjects in this book. Apparently, when searching for music that

Conclusion: Celebrating and Exploring Creation through Music

Hebrew Bible scholar Norman Habel has advocated for the addition of a celebration of creation to the church's liturgical year. Other key moments in the biblical narrative are given attention in this way, while creation has been neglected. He thus founded the [Season of Creation](#). And just as other holidays in the Christian calendar have music connected with the theme of that specific occasion, Habel has written a number of songs for use in church services during the four Sundays in September that he hopes increasing numbers of congregations and denominations will dedicate as the season of creation. As one of a very small number of biblical scholars who also writes songs, Habel's lyrics (usually to be sung to familiar tunes) deserve close attention. You can find many of them on [Habel's website](#) as well as [the Season of Creation website](#).

could represent the character of God in *Paradise Lost* (John Milton's famous retelling of the story in the early chapters of Genesis), composer [Krzysztof Penderecki was influenced by the experience of hearing Samaritan music](#). On this, see further Avigdor Herzog, "Samaritan Music," Grove Music Online <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic>; and Cindy Bylander, *Krzysztof Penderecki: A Bio-bibliography* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 243. Samaritans are the descendants of the Israelites who lived in the northern kingdom known as Israel, whereas Jews are mostly descended from those who lived in the southern kingdom known as Judah. For more on Samaritan music, see Reinhard Pummer, *The Samaritans: A Profile* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 282–84.

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8. Psalms

In this chapter you will

- revisit the large collection of song lyrics within the Bible known as the Psalms
- compare their historic liturgical use with their treatment as art music

Whole courses have been taught on the Psalms alone. Whole books can be written just on how one particular psalm has been given different musical treatments. But by the time it was published, it would already be obsolete, as new settings would have appeared in the interim—not that any book on even just one psalm would manage to be comprehensive. We have had the occasion to mention the Psalms repeatedly throughout this book already. They are important among the earliest evidence related to music in the biblical tradition, even though there may be yet older texts and references to music embedded here and there in the Torah. The early chapters of this book highlighted their importance in Jewish liturgy, in [Orthodox](#) and [Catholic](#) liturgy and monastic practice, and when arranged metrically and thereby turned into hymns in

Protestantism.¹ Still more can be said and—more importantly in this context—listened to.

Richard Taruskin writes in [*The Oxford History of Western Music*](#),

An important aspect of the monastic regimen was staying up at night, a discipline known as the vigil. To help them keep awake and to assist their meditations, monks would read and recite constantly, chiefly from the Bible, and particularly from the Psalter. The standard practice, eventually turned into a rule, was to recite the Psalter in an endless cycle, somewhat in the manner of a mantra, to distract the mind from physical appetites, to fill the back of the mind with spiritually edifying concepts so as to free the higher levels of consciousness (the intellectus, as it was called) for mystical enlightenment....

Christian psalmody emphasized not metaphors of wealth and exuberance (the orchestras, dancers, and multiple choirs of the Temple) but metaphors of community and discipline, both symbolized at once by unaccompanied singing in unison. That remained the Gregorian ideal, although the community of worshipers

1. In addition to the chapter on metrical psalms in this book, see also Janet Wootton's discussion of Isaac Watts and several other hymnwriters who set and drew on Scripture in her chapter, "The Future of the Hymn," in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 117–40 (especially 120–21).

was replaced in the more public repertory of the Mass by the specially trained....Monophony was thus a choice, not a necessity. It reflects not the primitive origins of music (as the chant's status as oldest surviving repertory might all too easily suggest) but the actual rejection of earlier practices, both Judaic and pagan, that were far more elaborate and presumably polyphonic.²

Composers have set the Psalms for liturgical use as well as simply as expressions of their own musicality. The Milken Archive has examples with commentary from a young [Leonard Bernstein \(Psalm 148\)](#) and from contemporary composer [Ofer Ben-Amots \(Psalm 81\)](#). You may also wish to listen now to the Psalm settings by Lili Boulanger in chapter 29.

While often the entirety of a psalm has been set to music, sometimes parts are left out. This may be done for any number of reasons, but whatever the motivation, the resulting song and its lyrics deserve to be considered not only as a “setting” of the text but also as a new composition heard both on its own terms and with consideration of what has been omitted. An excellent example is [Psalm 137](#). Many know it as a reggae or pop song (depending on whether their musical tastes incline them more toward the [Melodians](#), [Boney M](#), or [Sublime](#)). That version understandably omits the mention of dashing Babylonian infants against rocks. The reggae version also has some differences in wording that reflect the

2. Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 1, *Music from the Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)
<http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume1/actrade-9780195384819-div1-001007.xml>.

[Rastafarian](#) context in which the song was written. Other settings, such as [Pelham Humfrey's](#) from the seventeenth century, keep the words, as does [Mario Davidovsky's *Biblical Songs*](#), which includes this psalm along with settings of other biblical texts.³ In this latter instance, it is interesting that the composer chose small portions of other texts yet included the entirety of this psalm, switching to Hebrew in the middle and then back to English again.

Among the Psalms, one finds some of the most accessible and familiar parts of the Bible and some that may seem particularly troubling. Imprecatory psalms—that is, psalms that curse or wish ill upon enemies—can be difficult for some who come to the Bible expecting it to be divine words rather than human ones. When we recognize that the psalmist behind Psalm 137 had lost his or her own children in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, we understand the raw emotion expressed in this lament in a new light. It is not merely wishing others harm but a desire for those who caused pain to be made to feel that pain themselves. In some cases, the expression of the desire in this way may lead one to pull back and resist the urge to repay in kind. Complaining is embraced in some traditions as an important aspect of biblical piety, while in others its psychological and spiritual benefits are liable to remain unexplored, at least in formal religious settings.

Sometimes a composer opts to set just a portion of a psalm, perhaps even a small one. Herbert Howells has set [Psalm 42:1-3](#), [Psalm 84:9-10](#), and [Psalm 118:24](#). [Issachar Miron's *Psalms of Israel*](#) features small portions of several psalms set in the original Hebrew. In these cases, listeners should reflect on how the meaning of the words changes not only through the addition of music but through the omission of words. So too when a composer sets more than one psalm as part of a larger work, the question of what meaning emerges not only from the interplay of music and text but from

3. Davidovsky has also set parts of the Song of Songs to music in his *Shulamit's Dream* and *Scenes from Shir ha-Shirim*.

the juxtaposition of multiple texts deserves reflection. One famous example that you should listen to is [Igor Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*](#). Here is a performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with the Chicago Symphony Chorus and Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus, conducted by Sir Georg Solti.⁴



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In places, [Stravinsky](#) sets the words in a way that goes against the grain of the natural rhythms of the text or connectedness of words, allowing his musical goals to predominate. While [Stravinsky created a symphony from parts of several psalms](#), some composers have made a single psalm the focus of a symphony. Both [Carlos Riesco](#) and Archibald James Potter have composed works titled *Sinfonia "De Profundis"*. That is the Latin title of a great many settings of Psalm 130, including those by Lili Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg mentioned elsewhere in the book (John Rutter's *Requiem* also includes a setting of this psalm in English as one of its movements). It might be possible to miss that certain works are settings of psalms or other Scripture—for instance, if one did not translate the Latin title of [G. F. Handel's *Dixit Dominus*](#) (Psalm 110, "The Lord Said"). Whole [projects](#) dedicated to setting and recording the Psalms continue to appear. Individual artists such as [Poor Bishop Hooper](#) have set out to write and record a song setting of every psalm. Contemporary composers like [Tamás Beischer-Matyó](#) have set [multiple psalms](#). Having set out to create a setting

4. Licensed to YouTube by UMG on behalf of Decca.

of every psalm, Beischer-Matyó found after several that his compositional interests had shifted in a different direction (although he may one day return to the Psalms and even complete the project at some point). After setting [Psalm 1](#) and [Psalm 23](#), Beischer-Matyó found when working on [Psalm 6](#) that his entire approach to composition shifted as a result of his engagement with the biblical text and the act of interpreting it musically.⁵ In other chapters, we find something similar in the lives of other composers—how the process of setting a particular text was associated with a major change of direction in their musical style as well.⁶

One could spend a lot of time just comparing two relatively recent settings of Psalm 84, such as those by [Victoria Bond](#) and the [Philippines](#)-based Jesuit group [Himig Heswita](#). Bond's decision to set this particular psalm was influenced by the way it features prominently in [Brahms's Requiem](#) (which is discussed elsewhere in this book). [On her website, Bond describes](#) the way she decided to allow the Hebrew text and a range of possible English translations interact among the voices in her composition. She writes, "Counterpoint forms the basis of my musical language in this setting, it being a traditional technique favored by Baroque composers. Counterpoint was also a useful tool to express the multiplicity of translations, perspectives and moods I wanted to

5. This information comes from a personal conversation with the composer, to whom the author is extremely grateful for his input.
6. [Arvo Pärt](#) and [Arnold Schoenberg](#) provide particularly interesting and important examples.

illuminate. The voices unify only during the communal prayer-like settings of the opening text.”⁷ Have a listen.⁸



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One can also spend extended amounts of time comparing what the same composer has done with two different psalms, such as (in addition to several already mentioned) Cyrillus Kreek's settings of [Psalm 22](#) and [Psalm 137](#)—both laments with many resonances with and connections to other parts of the Bible. Consider also David Hurd's settings of Psalm 51 (“Miserere Mei, Deus”) and Psalm 100, which feel very different in keeping with the different moods of the words.⁹

7. Victoria Bond, “Repertoire: How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place (Psalm 84),” <https://www.victoriabond.com/artist.php?view=reper&rid=2776>. Counterpoint is when two melodic lines move independently of one another in music. The Baroque era is explained further in [chapter 25 on Bach](#).
8. Shared on YouTube by the composer Victoria Bond, the video is of a performance on November 23, 2014, at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, featuring the combined choirs of Temple Emanu-El and the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine, conducted by Kent Tritle.
9. Two recordings follow. The first is a recording of a performance of David Hurd's “Miserere Mei, Deus” at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, Oregon. Licensed to YouTube by the Orchard. The second is a recording of Hurd's “Psalm 100”



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There are [interviews](#) with [Dr. David Hurd](#) that will introduce you to more of his music as well as aspects of his life and work as a composer, and they are highly recommended.

In this chapter, more than perhaps any other, hopefully it will be clear that your exploration may begin here, with the Psalms and/or with this book, but if it ends here, it will miss a lot that is beautiful and fascinating. To further explore how the Psalms have found expression in a wide variety of styles and genres, have a listen to [U2's song "40,"](#) [Dr. Nathan M. Carter's](#) several Psalm settings, [Ian White's several albums,](#) [Steve Reich's "Tehillim,"](#) [Kim Hill's song "Psalm 1,"](#) [Jah Woosh's reggae setting of Psalm 121,](#) one of [Brazilian gospel artist Diante do Trono's versions of the Psalms,](#) and any of the [many rap versions](#) of the Psalms (which have important characteristics that bring us closer to ancient chanting practices

performed by the Singers, Minnesota Choral Artists. The recording is shared on YouTube by its publisher, E. C. Schirmer.

than other musical approaches do).¹⁰ All are contemporary and together illustrate how different the results can be when the words of the Psalms from ancient Israel are conjoined to music of another age, allowing them to be heard and sung in a fresh way. They provide an opportunity to reflect on whether and to what extent these varied songs may allow today's listener to get a slight inkling of what the Psalms were like for those who first wrote, sang, and heard them thousands of years ago.

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10. On the phenomenon of Brazilian gospel music, see [Philip Jenkins's article "Brazil's Diverse Música Gospel," Christian Century](#), November 12, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/notes-global-church/brazil-s-explosion-m-sica-gospel>. If you feel that microtonal music has been neglected, listen to [Mordecai Sandberg's setting of Psalm 130](#).

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9. Isaac and Family

In this chapter you will

- explore how composers and songwriters have wrestled with one of the most difficult and unsettling stories in the Bible, that in which Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son
- consider how music has given voice to those whose perspectives we are not given the chance to hear as fully as we might wish in the story in Genesis, including Sarah (the mother of Isaac and wife of Abraham), Hagar, and one other character who is not actually mentioned in the story at all

The Binding of Isaac

There are several disturbing, troubling, and distressing parts of the Bible. Many of them have rarely been explored through music. Some have been explored surprisingly often, at times with interesting adaptations to cope with the most difficult parts of the text in question (see, for instance, the discussion of Psalm 137 in chapter 8 on the Psalms). Few passages, however, connect with readers at as quite a visceral level as the story of the binding of Isaac (often referred to in Jewish tradition simply as the Akedah, the Hebrew word for “binding”). Child sacrifice is difficult for most modern

English speakers to fathom. Life in a world in which children who survived into adulthood were the exception rather than the rule is unimaginable to us. To people in that kind of context, offering one's firstborn child in the hope that capricious divine forces would show favor to the rest of one's offspring might have made a tragic sort of sense. Many Bible readers also take comfort in the fact that the Jewish Scriptures reflect a trajectory away from the practice of child sacrifice. Its influence in that regard is one that can presumably be appreciated and viewed positively by just about anyone today.

Yet the logic of the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in [Genesis 22](#) presupposes that a divine voice might ask one to sacrifice one's child and that the appropriate response would be to do so. Musical treatments of the story, however few they might be, provide real insights into the challenges for modern readers (as well as for many others all throughout history) of knowing what to do with the story and how to best understand it. Composer [Samuel Adler inserts the figure of Satan](#) into the story (as do some midrashic retellings of the story) and imagines the conversations that might have transpired not only between father and son but also between them and this additional malevolent character. [Ofer Ben-Amots](#), on the other hand, sets aside words entirely in his musical treatment of the story, which echoes music used in Jewish liturgy for mourning and is in some traditions specifically associated with the Shoah (also known as the Holocaust—i.e., the murder of some six million Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War). Here is a performance of Ben-Amots's "Akēda" by Laura Farré Rozada, shared on her YouTube channel.



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[Roxanna Panufnik](#) has also offered an instrumental interpretation of the story. [Aharon Harlap's treatment](#), on the other hand, sets the text for choir without instruments.

More than one interpreter has wondered whether the solution might not be to place the blame for things on another figure, whether the devil or Abraham's own mind. The latter may be assumed in the lyrics of Joan Baez's song "Isaac and Abraham." Interestingly, Baez also attributes the sparing of Isaac to Abraham as well. There may be voices in his mind, but we are never told that any come from a source outside.¹



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Unless one reads the lyrics, it would be easy to miss that [Bob Dylan's song "Highway 61 Revisited"](#) is about this story. The well-known modern songwriter and singer Leonard Cohen has also offered his treatment of it.²



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1. The recording of a live performance embedded here has been shared on YouTube by George Minister, who also has a recording of [Baez singing a calypso version of the Lord's Prayer](#) on his channel.
2. Official audio recording from Leonard Cohen's YouTube channel. Licensed by SME on behalf of Columbia.

from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=39#oembed-3>

English composer [Benjamin Britten](#) set two very different versions of the story to music. His “[Canticle II](#)” (with [text](#) taken from the [Chester Miracle Plays](#)) ends with Abraham sparing Isaac. This performance features countertenor Leandro Marziotte and tenor Raphael Höhn accompanied by Carolien Drewes on piano.³



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When he revisits the story in the context of his *War Requiem*, however, he sets [Wilfred Owen’s poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young.”](#) which ends the story with the following lines:

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

Closely connected to this is a recent composition by Delvyn Case that sets the Elohist version of the story to music—that is, one of the sources that scholars have detected behind the version we

3. Shared by Leandro Marziotte on his own YouTube channel.

now have in Genesis in its present form. Have a listen to the world premiere performance, which has been shared by the composer on his YouTube channel, and read more about the work and the sources of inspiration behind it [on the composer's website](#).



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Others have explored the story in music, and the music (or the cessation thereof) is an important part of the interpretation offered. [Igor Stravinsky](#) depicts a steady flow of words and music until the command to sacrifice Isaac is given, after which there is an abrupt silence that conveys a reaction of astonishment and shock more effectively than any combination of notes or words could. Also needing a mention here are the works (including several based on a libretto by Pietro Metastasio) that understand Isaac and his near sacrifice as a type of the sacrifice of Jesus, reflecting a long history of Christian interpretation of the story.⁴

Sarah

[The words of Benjamin Britten's "Canticle II"](#) at one point depict

4. A connection between Jesus and Isaac must have been made before some of our earliest Christian writings were composed, since already in Paul's letters the language of God as one who "did not spare his only Son" ([Romans 8:32](#)) seems to already be traditional.

Isaac wishing his mother were there. Readers of the Bible may or may not have noticed how Abraham's wife Sarah is impacted by Abraham attempting to sacrifice Isaac. Immediately following this story, we are told that Sarah dies. Did Abraham's action cause her death? Some have considered that as a possible interpretation, including [Alicia Jo Rabins in her song "River So Wide."](#)⁵



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=39#oembed-6>

[Sarah's story is also included in Andrea Clearfield's suite *Women of Valor*](#), which tells a number of biblical women's stories from their own point of view.⁶ We are not told whether Abraham and Isaac ever spoke again after the attempt to sacrifice him. Noticing such details opens many possible avenues of interpretation, which composers and songwriters have explored in a variety of ways. What they have produced can assist those wrestling with a text that continues to haunt its readers.

5. Shared by singer-songwriter Alicia Jo Rabins on her own YouTube channel.
6. Additional information may be found in [chapter 34 about Clearfield](#) as well as on the [composer's website](#). Judith Lang Zaimont has composed "[Parable: A Tale of Abram and Isaac](#)." She has also composed a work with the title "A Woman of Valor," the singular focusing on the phrase from Proverbs 31. More details about both works may be found in the [liner notes](#) provided on the Milken Archive website.

Hagar

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is often given less attention than that of Sarah and Isaac, although Hagar's story is part of the [readings for Rosh Hashanah](#), the Jewish New Year. Hagar's traumatic experience, courage, and powerful emotion have unsurprisingly led more than one composer to gravitate to the text. Sometimes what the text emphasizes sparks a creative response, while at others the voices that are not heard or are downplayed may invite exploration, expanding on and extending what is said in the text. Andrea Clearfield has explored Hagar's perspective (just as she has done with Sarah's perspective and that of other female characters in the Bible in her *Women of Valor* suite mentioned above), and [Sally Beamish's opera *Hagar in the Wilderness*](#) does so as well. If you have an opportunity to hear the latter work, additional information is online in [an interview of Beamish by Kate Molleson](#) as well as a [video interview with both Beamish and librettist Clara Glynn](#). When he was just fourteen years old, [Franz Schubert](#) set a [poem about Hagar to music](#) in his song "[Hagars Klage](#)" ("Hagar's Lament"). Kathie Lee Gifford and Nicole C. Mullen have explored the perspective of Hagar together with that of Ruth and others in their oratorio [The God Who Sees](#). In his [score to the 1966 movie *The Bible: In the Beginning*](#), Toshiro Mayuzumi provides an instrumental exploration of "[Hagar the Egyptian](#)."

Abraham's Daughter

Finally, even some of the biggest fans of the *Hunger Games* movies may have missed that [Arcade Fire's song "Abraham's Daughter"](#) on the soundtrack to the movie depicts this character not mentioned in the Bible playing a heroic role in the story not unlike that which

Katniss plays in the movies (and the novels on which they were based).

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10. Exodus

In this chapter you will

- encounter side by side some settings of a text the musical treatments of which have been mentioned separately in thematic chapters of this book
- discover how the cinematic depiction of the exodus inspired a famous heavy metal song

The exodus comes up in a number of chapters in this book, as do many other texts. The chapter divisions allow us to explore the intersection of the Bible and music through a focus on texts, composers, genres, and other things. Each grouping inevitably separates some things from others. We will not repeat the discussion of Miriam's musical response to the exodus in the first chapter of this book, nor our exploration of exodus themes in spirituals, nor Schoenberg's treatment. Centuries-old and recent cinematic treatments of the story appear in chapter 27 on musicals and oratorios. Yet even so, there are many other musical explorations of the exodus story. Here is R. Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses*.¹

1. This 1968 recording of Dett's 1937 work *The Ordering of Moses*, performed by Jeanette Walters, soprano; Carol Brice, contralto; John Miles, tenor; and John Work, baritone with the Talladega



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There is also [Elmer Bernstein's film score for *The Ten Commandments*](#). Here is a suite of music from the film courtesy of the Makris Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Predrag Gosta (who shared this 2021 performance on the orchestra's YouTube channel).



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One of the famous songs by the band Metallica, “Creeping Death,” was inspired not just by the exodus story in general but specifically by the depiction of the angel of death in the movie *The Ten Commandments*. This video conveys this very well by using scenes from the movie to accompany the song.²

College Choir is directed by Frank Harrison and the Mobile Symphony Orchestra, conducted by William Levi Dawson.

2. Uploaded to the Savage Mister YouTube channel. Audio licensed to YouTube by Tangible Medium Recordings (on behalf of EMV) et al.



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For a very different film score treatment, have a listen to [Ennio Morricone's music for the 1974 film *Moses the Lawgiver*](#). The story receives operatic treatment in [Gioachino Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*](#), which premiered in 1818. The religious subject matter allowed the composer to [circumvent a ban](#) on opera during [Lent](#), when his new work would be performed.³



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Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach composed the oratorio [“Die Israeliten in der Wüste”](#) (The Israelites in the Desert).⁴

3. Christian Vásquez here conducts Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* in this performance by the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra and Simon Bolivar Choir of Venezuela. The recording was uploaded by Christian Vásquez to his own YouTube channel.
4. C. P. E. Bach's “Die Israeliten in der Wüste,” performed by the Harvard University Choir, Harvard Baroque Chamber Orchestra, and Grand Harmonie, conducted by Edward Elwyn Jones and featuring Amanda Forsythe and Jessica Petrus, sopranos; Jonas



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=40#oembed-5>

[The ongoing celebration of the exodus](#) during the [Passover holiday](#) has in turn inspired a great deal of [additional music](#). Events and legends related to national origins gave rise to music that gave rise to biblical narratives that gave rise to annual celebrations that gave rise to music—and on and on it goes!

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II. King David (and His Family, Friends, and Enemies)

In this chapter you will

- learn about King David, who is depicted in the Bible as being a musician
- reflect on what may be distinctive or particularly interesting about music that explores the life of a musician
- consider how musical interpretations of David's relationships with other individuals, such as Bathsheba, Jonathan, and Absalom, may gain emotional power through musical retelling but also have their meaning altered or adapted in ways that deserve close scrutiny

Introduction: David in Music and as Musician

King David is a figure who stands at a number of interesting points of intersection. He is a key figure in Judaism and Christianity. He is the founder of a dynasty, and when that dynasty was interrupted, the result was hope for its restoration, expressed in terms of a

future anointed one (Messiah/Christ), a hope that Christians consider to be fulfilled in Jesus. David is viewed as the author of many psalms (although the Hebrew wording used, “to David,” may indicate a dedication to or sponsorship by the Davidic king rather than authorship by David himself). David is said to have been a musician according to [1 Samuel 16](#), which says that the king before him—Saul, the first king of Israel—employed David precisely for his musical ability to relieve the suffering Saul experienced at the hands of an afflicting spirit.

Here is an Israeli song that highlights and explores some of the things the Bible says about David (performed by the Yamma Ensemble and shared by them on their YouTube channel).



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=41#oembed-1>

[Arthur Honegger](#) wove together music and narration in [his telling of the story of David, *Le Roi David* \(1921\)](#). [Darius Milhaud](#) is another twentieth-century composer who explored David's life. [Carl Nielsen of Denmark focused on David and Saul](#) in his work. Contemporary composer [Susan Bingham has explored stories about David and Jonathan](#) (the son of King Saul) in a [chancel opera commissioned by the Gay Christians' Readings Group of Christ Church Parish](#) in New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States. Josef Tal has set a story from the life of Saul in his [Saul at Tel Dor](#). The [oratorio Saul](#) by [G. F. Handel](#) also expands on the stories in many of the texts mentioned here.

Jonathan

The relationship of David to Jonathan is an important topic in its own right, with aspects of it underexplored through music, not least that of same-sex attraction. Here is a famous setting by Thomas Weelkes of *O Jonathan, woe is me*, David's lament on hearing of Jonathan's death, performed by the Queen's Six in the Marble Hall in the Monastery of St. Florian in Austria and shared by the performers on their YouTube channel.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=41#oembed-2>

Bathsheba

In cinematic depictions of the life of David (whether in film, television, animation, or any other form), music plays a significant role in providing the viewer with interpretive cues and reinforcing the meaning conveyed through words and images. Consider, for example, [Alfred Newman's score](#) for [the movie *David and Bathsheba*](#).¹ You can [watch the entire movie online](#), and if you choose to do so, listen closely to the music. On the other hand, it would be an interesting challenge to [listen to the music on its own](#) and see if you can guess what is happening in each scene. You can

1. The soundtrack includes a [setting of Psalm 23](#).

then either watch the movie or look up information about the score to see if you were correct.

There is a long tradition of depicting the story of David and Bathsheba as one of mutually consensual adultery. If we pay close attention to the details, however, we will see that nothing indicates Bathsheba's consent. After seeing Bathsheba bathing from the vantage point of the roof of his palace, David sends men to bring her to him when her husband, Uriah, is away. That undoubtedly gave him the opportunity to see places that were otherwise concealed from view and whose inhabitants would have considered them private. There is [a version of the song "Hallelujah" with words changed to be about Bathsheba](#) that focuses on this.²

Absalom

A text from the story of David that has been [set to music very often](#) over the centuries is [2 Samuel 18:33](#). Works that set this text about David's lament after receiving the news of the death of his son Absalom usually bear the title of the first words in the passage: "When David Heard." Considering examples of settings from across time can be useful in a number of ways, and this text has been set so frequently that it affords ample opportunity to do so. The specific circumstances in the story of David and Absalom are rather unique, yet the experience of loss of one's child is alas not uncommon. Surveying the different historical and personal circumstances that make it seem relevant to different composers illuminates the interplay between ancient text and those who sought solace and/or inspiration in setting it to music. A comparison across time may also

2. [The original by Leonard Cohen is discussed in chapter 20 on allusions.](#)

help you understand why older music often sounds boring, or at least less emotional and moving, to listeners today. The simple fact is that our ears become accustomed to certain sounds, so things that once sounded innovative and fresh come to sound archaic and “old hat” (an expression that itself has, I believe, gone out of fashion). Creation of tension and the pushing of the boundaries of acceptable sound and harmony followed by a resolution to something more pleasing to the ear play a major role in how music impacts us emotionally. Apart from possible nostalgia, music from the 1950s may connect with a new listener less powerfully on an emotional level than something from their own time, which speaks their own musical language. How much more so will this be true of music from the 1650s?

With this in mind, listen to [Thomas Tomkins's](#) setting, which sounds a lot like any other music of its time (the seventeenth century) to most modern listeners, especially on a first hearing. The harmonic language is clearly that of a bygone era, even if we can recognize the composer's skill. [The same may be said](#) of [Robert Ramsey's setting](#) from the same time period.³



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=41#oembed-3>

If one then listens to [Eric Whitacre's recent setting](#), begun on the occasion of the death of the son of a friend of his, the use of dissonance and harmony tends to be experienced differently by

3. Performance by the Choir of Clare College, provided to YouTube by the Orchard Enterprises. Copyright 2011 Regis Records.

a modern listener. The dissonance in this example provides a good illustration of how clashing sounds can help convey emotions like agony and grief. The use of repetition also plays a part in this. Notice as well how effectively the composer uses the contrast between an individual or just a few voices and many voices singing different notes simultaneously. The interplay between complexity and simplicity is also a factor in the emotional impact of music. For those who read music, [this video of the song together with the score](#) shows how these effects are accomplished. The piece is also available on SoundCloud courtesy of the composer.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=41#oembed-4>

You can [read about Whitacre's perspective on the text and setting it to music on his website](#). [Looking at the score while listening](#) provides a visual representation of what the composer has done at many of the key emotional moments, one that will likely be understood even by those who do not read music. A listener today will agree that this music is anything but boring. It has moments of dissonance that grab us, using a modern idiom so that the connection to our ears, brains, and emotions is more direct. We can think about this in relation to not only music but also religious texts and ideas. Merely repeating the same words in the same way as they were uttered in bygone generations will not have the same impact they originally had. What once was provocative, fresh, innovative, and even radical may come to seem conservative, trite, dull, and backward-looking.

If you would like to hear what another contemporary composer has done with these words, [Norman Dinerstein's](#) work

provides another good example, [as also does Richard Burchard's](#) and that of [David Diamond](#).⁴

More Music about David

Herbert Howells's song "[King David](#)" is not a setting of a biblical text, but its [lyrics](#) use the biblical character to explore the relationship between music and grief. Howells has also set [Psalm 42:1-3](#), [Psalm 84:9-10](#), and [Psalm 118:24](#) (as well as incorporating still others into his *Hymnus Paradisi*, which we discuss in another chapter). Some musical settings of the Psalms highlight their connection with David and/or focus on those psalms in the Hebrew Bible that are specifically attributed to him. [Hungarian composer Franz Liszt](#) is one example. There is also a musical [King David](#) with words by Tim Rice and music by Alan Menken (better known for their collaboration on Disney animated musicals *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*). Rice also provided the words to *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The King David musical was initially commissioned to commemorate the three thousandth anniversary of the city of Jerusalem.

The life of David and the stories of Israelite monarchs have been given a great many different kinds of musical treatment. There is drama, heroism, abuse of power, lament, romance, conflict, and through it all a significant amount of singing mentioned in the relevant texts themselves.

4. There are recordings on YouTube of performances of the latter by [Mildred Miller](#) and [Rev. Eric Nielsen](#).

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12. Elijah

In this chapter you will

- learn about how composers or their ancestors may have felt compelled to convert to Christianity from Judaism within the context of European society
- explore how Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy explored his Jewish and Christian identity through his musical exploration of the story of Elijah
- consider how the start of the work interprets the prophetic role and captures Elijah's appearance in the narrative
- have a chance to read the composer's correspondence with the librettist about his work on it

The precise texts that are placed under the category of Prophetic literature differ between the Jewish and Christian canons. In Judaism, the Former Prophets includes Joshua through 2 Kings, and the Latter Prophets does not add Daniel among them the way the Christian Old Testament does. Christians nonetheless recognize many of what they categorize as the Historical Books as being *about* prophets. There is thus still substantial overlap.

The best work for exploring this intersection, the similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian Scripture and perspectives on the prophets, is Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's *Elijah*. [Mendelssohn himself was baptized Protestant, while his](#)

[family was Jewish](#). Many Jews converted as an act of self-preservation in the hostile Christian environment of nineteenth-century Germany. Mendelssohn would have had a sense of tension in his identity.

Listen to Mendelssohn's *Elijah* here or in one of the many other recordings available online and elsewhere.¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=42#oembed-1>

The way the piece begins with the voice of the prophet is unusual and striking, especially given that the role is assigned to a bass. The deep voice of a bass is powerful but more often holds down the root of harmony in the background rather than serving as the leading role. This choice fits the personality of the prophet as conveyed in the biblical texts. The composer's choices grab the listener's attention and serve to highlight the centrality of speech to the identity and role of prophets. While the work is ostensibly about the person, as a prophet, the delivery of the message understood to come from God is central. The [text is largely drawn from the Bible](#), and beginning with Elijah's sudden pronouncement of divine

1. This performance was shared by Boston University on their YouTube channel, being a performance of their College of Fine Arts. The Boston University Symphony Orchestra and Symphonic Chorus is here conducted by Ann Howard Jones. The soloists are soprano Liz Baldwin, mezzo-soprano Penelope Bitzas, tenor Martin Bakari, baritone James Demler, and soprano Kira Winter.

judgment mirrors in a striking way the sudden appearance of [Elijah](#) within the biblical narrative.

Also consider the significance of the other parts of the Bible besides 1–2 Kings, and even Prophetic literature in general, that the libretto incorporates, especially the use of a small snippet of the Gospel of Matthew. A major theme of the work is the highlighting and reinforcing of parallels between the lives of Elijah and Jesus.²

We have a number of [Mendelssohn's letters](#), so you can read his side of the exchange about *Elijah* while working on it with the pastor who created the [libretto](#). Does reading these letters give you greater insight into his compositional choices as a composer?

Letters to Pastor Julius Schubring, Dessau.

Leipzig, November 2nd, 1838.

Dear Schubring,

Many, many thanks for your letter, which I received the day before yesterday, and for the parcel, which came to-day. You have again rendered me an essential service, and I feel most grateful to you; how can you ask whether I wish you to proceed in the same way? When all is so well put together, I have almost nothing to do, but to

2. Jeffrey S. Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 114, 133–44.

write music for the words. I ought to have previously told you, that the sheets you took away with you are by no means to be regarded as containing a mature design, but as a mere combination of the materials I had before me for the purpose of eventually forming a plan. So the passage of the widow, and also of the raven, being left out, is decidedly most advisable, and also the whole commencement being abridged, in order that the main points may be dwelt on to one's heart's content. I would urgently entreat you to proceed with your work, so far as your time and leisure will permit, and soon to send me the continuation of the first part, from where you left off, and which must now be of considerable length. Rest assured that, as I already told you, you will earn my most sincere gratitude.

You say that at first, you could not make anything of the subject, but that a sudden light dawned on you. I figured to myself Elijah as a grand, mighty prophet, such, as we might again require in our own day energetic and zealous, but also stern, wrathful, and gloomy; a striking contrast to the Court myrmidons and popular rabble,—in fact, in opposition to the whole world, and yet borne on angels' wings. Is this the inference you drew from the subject, and this the sense in which you conceived an affection for it? I am anxious to do justice to the *dramatic* element, and, as you say, no epic narrative must be introduced. I am glad to learn that you are searching out the real sense of the Scriptural words, which cannot fail to touch every heart; but if I might make one observation, it is that I would fain see the Dramatic Element more prominent, as well

as more exuberant and defined,—appeal and rejoinder, question and answer, sudden interruptions, etc. etc. Not that it disturbs me, for example, Elijah first speaking of the assembling of the people, and then forthwith addressing them. All such liberties are the natural privileges of such a representation in an oratorio; but I should like the representation itself to be as spirited as possible; for instance, it annoys me that Elijah does not reply to Ahab's words, No. 16 till No. 18; various other speeches and a chorus intervening. I should like to have had an instant and eager rejoinder, etc. etc.

But we shall no doubt presently agree on such points, and I would only entreat you, when you resume your work, to think of this wish of mine. Above all, accept my thanks for your kindness, and write to me soon on the same subject.—Ever your

Felix M. B.

Leipzig, December 6th, 1838.

Dear Schubring,

Along with this you will receive the organ pieces and “Bonifacius” which I also enclose. Thank you much for the latter, and for the manuscripts you have from time to time sent me for “Elijah;” they are of the greatest possible use to me, and though I may here and there make some alterations, still the whole affair, by your aid, is now placed on a much firmer footing. With regard to the dramatic element, there still seems to be a diversity

of opinion between us. In such a character as that of Elijah, like every one in the Old Testament, except perhaps Moses, it appears to me that the dramatic should predominate,—the personages should be introduced as acting and speaking with fervour; not however, for Heaven's sake, to become mere musical pictures, but inhabitants of a positive, practical world, such as we see in every chapter of the Old Testament; and the contemplative and pathetic element which you desire, must be entirely conveyed to our apprehension by the words and the mood of the acting personages.

In your “Bonifacius,” for instance, this was a point to which I was by no means reconciled; in my opinion he ought to have been treated dramatically throughout, like a theatrical representation (in its best sense) only without *visible* action. The Scriptural allusions too should, according to my idea, be more sparingly introduced, and placed in his mouth alone. The contrast between this style of language (which pervades the whole) and that at the coronation, is not sufficiently equalized. Pepin, and all the pagans, and pagan priests, flit before me like shadows or misty forms, whereas, to satisfy me, they must be solid, robust men. Do not be displeased that I send you a bit of criticism along with my thanks, for such is my insufferable custom. Besides a cold and cough make me unusually rabid to day. I am now about to set to work on the “Elijah,” and to plough away at the soil as I best can; if I do not get on with it, you must come to my aid; and I hope as kindly as ever, and preserve the same regard for your

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

Leipzig, December 16th, 1842.

My dear Schubring,

I now send you, according to your permission, the text of "Elijah," so far as it goes. I do beg of you to give me your best assistance, and return it soon with plenty of notes on the margin (I mean Scriptural passages, etc.). I also enclose your former letters on the subject, as you wished, and have torn them out of the book in which they were. They must, however, be replaced, so do not forget to send them back to me. In the very first of these letters (at the bottom of the first page), you properly allude to the chief difficulty of the text, and the very point in which it is still the most deficient—in universally valid and impressive thoughts and words; for of course it is not my intention to compose what you call "a Biblical Walpurgis Night." I have endeavoured to obviate this deficiency by the passages written in Roman letters, but there is still something wanting, even to complete these, and to obtain suitable comprehensive words for the subject. This, then, is the first point to which I wish to direct your attention, and where your assistance is very necessary. Secondly, in the "dramatic" arrangement. I cannot endure the half operatic style of most of the oratorio words, (where recourse is had to common figures, as, for example, an Israelite, a maiden, Hannah, Micaiah, and others, and where, instead of saying "this and that occurred," they

are made to say, "Alas! I see this and that occurring.") I consider this very weak, and will not follow such a precedent. However, the everlasting "he spake" etc., is also not right. Both of these are avoided in the text; still this is, and ever will be, one of its weaker aspects.

Reflect, also, whether it is justifiable that no positively dramatic figure except that of Elijah appears. I think it is. He ought, however, at the close, at his ascension to heaven, to have something to say (or to sing). Can you find appropriate words for this purpose? The second part, moreover, especially towards the end, is still in a very unfinished condition. I have not as yet got a final chorus; what do you advise it to be? Pray study the whole carefully, and write on the margin a great many beautiful arias, reflections, pithy sentences, choruses, and all sorts of things, and let me have them as soon as possible.

I also send the 'Méthode des Méthodes.' While turning over its leaves, I could not help thinking that you will here and there find much that will be useful. If that be the case, I beg you will keep it as long as you and your young pianoforte player may require it. I don't use it at all. If it does not please you, I can send you instead, a sight of Zimmermann's 'Pianoforte School,' which is composed pretty much on the same principle, and has only different examples, etc.

Speaking is a very different thing from writing. The few minutes I lately passed with you and yours, were more enlivening and cheering than ever so many letters.—Ever your

Felix M. B.

Leipzig, May 23rd, 1846.

Dear Schubring,

Once more I must trouble you about "Elijah;" I hope it is for the last time, and I also hope that you will at some future day derive enjoyment from it; and how glad I should be were this to be the case! I have now quite finished the first part, and six or eight numbers of the second are already written down. In various places, however, of the second part I require a choice of really fine Scriptural passages, and I do beg of you to send them to me! I set off to-night for the Rhine, so there is no hurry about them; but in three weeks I return here, and then I purpose forthwith to take up the work and complete it. So I earnestly beseech of you to send me by that time a rich harvest of fine Bible texts. You cannot believe how much you have helped me in the first part; this I will tell you more fully when we meet. On this very account I entreat you to assist me in improving the second part also. I have now been able to dispense with all historical recitative in the form, and introduced individual persons. Instead of the Lord, always an angel or a chorus of angels, and the first part and the largest half of the second are finely rounded off. The second part begins with the words of the queen, "So let the gods do to me, and more also," etc. (1 Kings xix. 2); and the next words about which I feel secure are those in the scene in the wilderness (same chapter, fourth and

following verses); but between these I want, *first*, something more particularly characteristic of the persecution of the prophet; for example, I should like to have a couple of choruses *against* him, to describe the people in their fickleness and their rising in opposition to him; *secondly*, a representation of the third verse of the{398} same passage; for instance, a duett with the boy, who might use the words of Ruth, “Where thou goest, I will go,” etc. But what is Elijah to say before and after this? and what could the chorus say? Can you furnish me with, first, a duett, and then a chorus in this sense? Then, till verse 15, all is in order; but there a passage is wanted for Elijah, something to this effect:—“Lord, as Thou willest, be it with me:” (this is not in the Bible, I believe?) I also wish that *after* the manifestation of the Lord he should announce his entire submission, and after all this persecution declare himself to be entirely resigned, and eager to do his duty. I am in want too of some words for him to say at, or before, or even after his ascension, and also some for the chorus. The chorus sings the ascension historically with the words from 2 Kings ii. 11, but then there ought to be a couple of very solemn choruses. “God is gone up” will not do, for it was not the Lord, but Elijah who went up; however, something of *that* sort. I should like also to hear Elijah’s voice once more at the close.

(May Elisha sing soprano? or is this inadmissible, as in the same chapter he is described as a “bald head”? Joking apart, must he appear at the ascension as a prophet, or as a youth?)

Lastly, the passages which you have sent for the

close of the whole (especially the trio between Peter, John, and James) are too historical and too far removed from the grouping of the (Old Testament) story; still{399} I could manage with the former, if, instead of the trio, I could make a chorus out of the words; it would be very quickly done, and this will probably be the case. I return you the pages that you may have every necessary information, but pray send them back to me. You will see that the bearing of the whole is quite decided; it is only the lyric passages (from which arias, duets, etc., could be composed) which fail towards the end. So I beg you will get your large Concordance, open it, and bestow this time on me, and when I return three weeks hence at latest, let me find your answer. Continue your regard for your

Felix³

[Mendelssohn wrote other letters](#) about his work after it was completed that you may be interested to read. These are included here because reading a composer's [correspondence](#) about a work as they are working on it and seeking feedback and input provides a unique perspective on the process as well as the finished product. If you know German, you can read much more of the [correspondence between Mendelssohn and Schubring](#), including the latter's

3. Excerpted from [Letters of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy from 1833 to 1847](#), London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1863, which is in the public domain.

contributions to the conversation in addition to what Mendelssohn wrote.

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13. Romance in the Bible?

Ruth and Boaz, Samson and Delilah

In this chapter you will

- consider why stories about men and women in the Bible are often dramatized as romances when this is not an explicit part of the stories in the texts
- prepare to contrast the texts and music with those in the next chapter, which focuses on settings of the Bible's erotic poetry

The story of Ruth has been explored as a drama about the romance between Ruth and Boaz, yet there is little basis for that in the biblical text. The story told in the book of Ruth is much more about widowed women's vulnerability in the time the story is set and the resourcefulness with which they cope with their challenging circumstances. It is also a story of loyalty, as Ruth, who is from Moab, accompanies her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to her homeland in Israel to not only worship her God but eventually become part of the history of her people as she ends up being among the ancestors of King David. There is probably also a message of inclusion that challenges what other parts of the Scriptures say, such as [Deuteronomy 23:3](#) excluding Moabites from the assembly of God's people even to the tenth generation.

[Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Naomi and Ruth*, op. 137,](#) focuses on the female characters and is a setting of the biblical text of Ruth 1:1–17.¹



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=43#oembed-1>

[Luise Adolpha Le Beau's *Ruth: Biblical Scenes*, op. 27;](#) César Franck's *Ruth*, *eglogue biblique*; Lennox Berkeley's [*Ruth*, op. 50;](#) [Georg Schumann's opera *Ruth*, op. 20;](#) and [Susan Bingham's chancel opera *Ruth*](#) all have librettos that expand on the biblical text. Franz Waxman explored the story twice: in [a work for narrator and orchestra](#) as well as [a film score for *The Story of Ruth*](#). There is also an interesting [cantata](#) by [Isabella Parker](#). Ruth is also included in [Frederick Jacobi's *Hagiographa*](#), and Ruth and Naomi feature in [Aaron Avshalomov's *Four Biblical Tableaux*](#).

The story of Samson and Delilah provides a more promising basis for exploring romance, although the focus is on the antagonism between their two peoples, the Israelites and Philistines. Delilah is often depicted in misogynistic ways, being conformed to the type of the “femme fatale.” This is true in movies such as [*Samson and Delilah*, with a soundtrack by Victor Young](#), as well as operas such as [Camille Saint-Saens's *Samson et Dalila*](#). There are also modern songs, such as [Blind Willie Johnson's “Samson and Delilah”](#) (most famous in the [rendition by the Grateful Dead](#)). It is due to patriarchal presuppositions that a powerful, independent, seductive woman tends to be evaluated or even prejudged

1. This recording was provided to YouTube by NAXOS of America.

negatively. There are several striking songs by female songwriters and vocalists about Samson sung from the perspective of Delilah or that at least take that as their starting point for a broader exploration of a romantic relationship. Listen to [Regina Spektor's "Samson"](#) and also this [song by Madi Blair](#) written as a project in the class the author teaches at Butler University. There is also an [oratorio, *Samson*](#) by G. F. Handel. The chapters that follow on Song of Songs / Song of Solomon and Salome will explore other examples of romance in (or introduced into the elaboration of stories in) the Bible in conjunction with the musical treatment thereof.

For Further Reading

Clanton, Dan W. *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Bible's Women in the Arts and Music*. New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2009.

Fauquet, Joël-Marie. "Les Deux Versions De 'Ruth' (1845/1871). Essai D'interprétation D'un Double Succès." *Revue Belge De Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Muziekwetenschap* 45 (1991): 97–108.

Leneman, Helen, *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007.

Locke, Ralph P. "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's 'Samson et Dalila.'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, no. 3 (1991): 261–302.

Sallinger, E. "Saint-Saëns' 'Other': Orientalism

in Samson et Dalila.” MA thesis, Duquesne University, 2010.

14. Song of Songs

In this chapter you will

- encounter settings in different styles of words from the Bible's book of romantic poetry, the Song of Songs (sometimes called the Song of Solomon)
- explore whether musical settings of parts of the Song of Songs help you engage with its celebration of erotic love

Picking up a theme introduced in chapter 13 on Ruth, the most promising text in the Bible for exploration in romantic terms is the Song of Songs (also called the Canticle of Canticles or the Song of Solomon). Yet there is a long [history](#) of turning that text into an allegory about the love between God and Israel or Christ and the church. It thus turns out that the Bible's erotic poetry gets used in worship, while texts with fewer elements of romance and sexual desire have been turned into operas with those elements. There are, however, exceptions, and here is an example of [words from Song of Songs](#) being turned into a [folk song in Israel](#). The song, *Dodi li* (My beloved is mine), became popular much farther afield (as indicated by this performance by Rika Zarai in France in 1960).¹

1. Zarai also sang a song in French with the title “[Exodus](#),” which was from the soundtrack of a film by the same name. The movie



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Also, [Percy Grainger composed “Love Verses from the Song of Songs.”](#)²



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The title of Romanian composer Laurențiu Ganea’s setting, “[Shir HaShirim—Cântarea Cântărilor](#),” is in both Hebrew and Romanian, but the text is only the Hebrew.³ You may also enjoy listening to the musical explorations of parts of the Song of Songs by [Yehezkel Braun](#), [Lukas Foss](#), and others. Here are two by [Marc Lavry](#) in Hebrew, provided to YouTube by the Marc Lavry Heritage Society.

focused not on the exodus described in the Bible but on the founding of the modern state of Israel.

2. Monteverdi Orchestra and Choir, conducted by John Eliot Gardiner. Provided to YouTube by Universal Music Group.
3. Ganea has also composed [a trilogy about Job’s sufferings](#).



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[Alexander Knaifel's *Make Me Drunk with Your Kisses*](#) sets up an expectation of romantic expression that the music may be perceived by listeners as conveying.

When a work has a Latin title like [Flos Campi](#), it can be easy to miss that [the Song of Songs is its source](#). However, even when works have English titles, some listeners may not recognize the source of the words. Take, for instance, “Arise My Love” by Stephen Paulus (performed here by the Northwest Tower Choir).



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Some settings of “Set Me as a Seal” include that by Nico Muhly.⁴



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=44#oembed-6>

Here is another setting of “Set Me as a Seal,” this one by William Walton, performed by the choir of St. John’s College Cambridge.⁵



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=44#oembed-7>

[Ryan Malone has set the entire book to music.](#) [Emmanuel Chabrier’s *La Sulamite*](#) is a setting of poetry [based on the Song of Songs](#) (the [Morgan Library and Museum has the composer’s original manuscript digitized](#)). [Kate Bush’s “Song of Solomon”](#) refers to the work in the title but bears little direct connection with the biblical text. Sinéad O’Connor’s “Dark I Am Yet Lovely,” on the other hand, is a setting of biblical text. It features prominently in this [interview about her album *Theology*](#), on which the song appears.

4. Shared to YouTube by Hal Leonard Choral.

5. Licensed to YouTube by Naxos.

For Further Reading

Matter, E. Ann. *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Sofer, Danielle. "The Macropolitics of Microsound: Gender and Sexual Identities in Barry Truax's *Song of Songs*." *Organised Sound* 23, no. 1 (2018): 80–90.

15. Esther

In this chapter you will

- discover the connection of the famous story of Queen Esther with the holiday Purim
- learn why and in what ways Esther's story has become the subject of such a varied array of instrumental works, oratorios, operas, plays, and movies

Purim is a Jewish holiday that has a largely comedic focus, and much music associated with the occasion is likewise far from serious. Yet the story that provides the inspiration for the holiday, the book of Esther in the Bible, has much more somber subject matter, and [musical treatments thereof](#) have often reflected that. Some have wedded the two—the festive holiday and the tale of genocide avoided. Add to this resonances with the composers' own time, as in the case of Darius Milhaud's *Esther de Carpentras* (which is about an effort to stage a performance of the story and a Catholic official's determination to use the occasion to try to get the Jewish community to renounce its faith and identity), and the musical exploration of the Esther story may prove extremely rich and multifaceted indeed.

Aaron Avshalomov's *Four Biblical Tableaux* makes [“Queen Esther's Prayer”](#) its first movement. [Benjamin Ivry's article in Forward](#) about Hugo Weisgall's opera *Esther* reflects on its significance both in relation to the composer's own experience and,

when performed more recently, in the wake of September 11, 2001. [Neil W. Levin writes in his liner notes for a Milken Archive recording](#) of the work that Weisgall and librettist Charles Kondek took significant liberties with the biblical story. Yet the fact that we have different ancient versions of the book of Esther makes it hard to fault any modern librettist or composer for expansion or selectivity (compare [the version in Catholic Bibles](#), based on the expanded Greek version, with that in [Jewish](#) and [Protestant Bibles](#) to see what I mean). Also particularly striking is [Jan Meyerowitz's symphony *Midrash Esther*](#). Midrash is a traditional form of Jewish literature that often included retellings of biblical stories that expanded on dialogue, explored things left unsaid, and otherwise sought to fathom the depths of scriptural narratives in ways only accessible if one employs this sort of creative liberty. Musical treatments of biblical texts are by definition “midrashic” in character, yet Meyerowitz stands out in explicitly acknowledging this and drawing attention to it.

Musical treatments of the story are not limited to Jewish composers. [Handel's oratorio *Esther*](#) represents the first English oratorio, and his choice to set this particular text deserves further exploration beyond what we can give it here. There is also incidental music composed by Danish composer C. F. E. Horneman. American composer William Bradbury's treatment in *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*, with libretto by Chauncey Marvin Cady, incorporates other texts from Scripture and also alludes to a number of hymns. The published score included an excerpt from the first-century Jewish historian [Flavius Josephus's expansion on the biblical narrative](#). Musicologist Juanita Karpf writes on this subject,

Although most of the work's lyrics consist of paraphrased excerpts from the Book of Esther, Cady also inserted his own verses along with passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Psalms. Bradbury appended another well-known version of the Esther narrative to the score—the essay “Concerning Esther, and Mordecai, and Haman,” written by the first-century historian Josephus. Some 6,700

words in length, this essay was often printed in programs distributed at performances of Esther. While Bradbury did not set any portion of Josephus's narrative to music, he considered its inclusion in concert programs and in his score to be important enough to justify the considerable expense of additional paper and printing: "Josephus' account of Esther is so full and complete, that it will very much enhance the interest of the piece."¹

Since [Josephus's retelling](#) (in his [Jewish Antiquities 11.6](#)) is itself a form of midrash, that returns our musical exploration of the story of Esther here to where it began. The intersecting resonances among multiple biblical texts, retellings of the Bible, a holiday connected with the story, and musical interpretation of the story containing echoes of multiple musical works, potentially accompanied by a printed program, all come together in this way to illustrate well the nature of what scholars following Julia Kristeva have called *intertextuality*.² A text is not and can never be sealed off as an isolated entity unto itself. This is true of musical "texts" (whether written or performed and heard) every bit as much as literary ones (whether written or spoken and heard).³

For Further Reading

1. Juanita Karpf, "[If It's in the Bible, It Can't Be Opera: William Bradbury's Esther, the Beautiful Queen, in Defiance of Genre](#)," *American Music* 29, no. 1 (2011): 4.
2. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36–37.
3. Also of interest is Victoria Bond's work [Sacred Sisters](#), which provides a musical exploration of the characters of Ruth, [Esther](#), and Judith.

Karpf, Juanita. "If It's in the Bible, It Can't Be Opera: William Bradbury's Esther, the Beautiful Queen, in Defiance of Genre." *American Music* 29, no. 1 (2011): 1-34.

———. "Populism with Religious Restraint: William B. Bradbury's Esther, the Beautiful Queen." *Popular Music Society* 23, no. 1 (1999): 1-29.

Kilgannon, Corey. "Purim! The Musical." *New York Times*, March 18, 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/nyregion/purim-the-musical.html>.

Kneebone, Emily. "Dilemmas of the Diaspora: The Esther Narrative in Josephus Antiquities 11.184-296." *Ramus* 36, no. 1 (2007): 51-77.

Walker, Jennifer. "Darius Milhaud, Esther De Carpentras, and the French Interwar Identity Crisis." MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015.

16. Salome

In this chapter you will

- learn how an unnamed Bible character became the focus of literature and music (and, in the process, some controversy)
- reflect on why once again a romantic element has been introduced into a biblical story that lacks it

The role Salome is given in the New Testament is a minor one, where she is not even named, yet she and her story have been the focus of a significant amount of music. Salome is the name given to the daughter of Herodias who dances for Herod Antipas and then asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter. There is no hint in the biblical text of any kind of romantic attraction between her and John the Baptist, but elaborations on her story have sometimes added such an element. A great deal of attention has been focused on her in music, painting, and literature despite the relative paucity of material about her in the [New Testament Gospels](#).

[Alex Ross's New Yorker article about Richard Strauss's opera](#)

Salome, which is built directly from [Oscar Wilde's text](#) rather than a libretto, raises important questions about the [composer's](#) motives for setting that controversial work as well as the place of same-sex attraction and anti-Jewish sentiment in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wilde's story incorporates not just elements of the story of John the Baptist in the Gospels but

language drawn from the [Song of Songs](#) as well. You can [watch as well as listen to Strauss's entire opera](#) online.¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=46#oembed-1>

There is also a [video with a complete score](#) and [another with piano reduction](#) for those who wish to dig into the written music. Wilde's story was [turned into a movie in 2013](#) with a [film score by Jeff Beal](#). The [1953 movie Salome](#) introduces romantic elements into the story that are different from Wilde's treatment. [The film score is by George Duning](#). One can also find copies of the 1923 silent movie *Salome* on YouTube with various musical scores created to accompany it, as beginning film score composers often use silent films that are now in the public domain to illustrate their creative abilities.

For Further Reading

Gálik, Marián. "Echoes of the Biblical

1. This recording of a performance at the Fisher Center on Sunday, March 20, 2022, was provided to YouTube by the Bard Conservatory on their YouTube channel.

Shulamite and Wilde's Salome in Three Modern Chinese Plays." *Monumenta Serica* 68, no. 1 (2020): 197-225.

Gerrard, Carter. "The Shulamite of Sodom: Wilde's Subversion of the Song of Songs and the Birth of the Monstrous-Feminine." *Miranda* 19 (2019). <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/20560>.

Riquelme, J. P. "Shalom/Solomon/Salomé: Modernism and Wilde's Aesthetic Politics." *Centennial Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 575-610.

17. The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

In this chapter you will

- discover whether “Mary’s Song” was in fact a “song” in its original context in the Gospel of Luke
- learn why some composers have set this same text to music repeatedly

For as long as there has been liturgical setting or singing of parts of the Bible to musical accompaniment, the Magnificat has been part of that. Often called “Mary’s Song/Canticle,” Luke 1:46–55 does not say that Mary sang the words in question. It features in Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant liturgies. [John Dunstaple](#) set the Magnificat in the fifteenth century, and many more followed, including [Tomás Luis de Victoria](#), [Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina](#), [Antonio Vivaldi](#), [J. S. Bach](#), [W. A. Mozart](#), [Franz Schubert](#), [Felix Mendelssohn](#), [Franz Liszt](#) (as part of his [Dante](#) Symphony), Anton Bruckner, Ralph Vaughan Williams, [John Rutter](#), [Krzysztof Penderecki](#), [Arvo Pärt](#), and (as part of the Orthodox All-Night Vigil) Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninov.

The Nunc Dimittis has been set on its own less frequently. This is sometimes called “Simeon’s Song” and also derives from the

infancy story in Luke's Gospel.¹ For a particularly striking modern setting, have a listen to [Sungji Hong's "Nunc Dimittis."](#) She has also set the [Pater Noster](#) (Our Father / Lord's Prayer) and has [an ongoing project exploring the life of Jesus through multiple musical works](#).

It can be challenging enough to set words to music that have been set many times before. With the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis together becoming a main recurring feature of the [Evensong liturgy of the Anglican Church](#) (a [daily service marking the end of another day](#)), a further challenge was added for church composers: set these same words over and over again.² If adding to what others have produced with one new offering of one's own can be daunting, what about when one has to add another new creation of one's own with the same text? Anglican composers were not the first to face this challenge, of course. A number of composers in the era of Gregorian chant, for instance, made multiple musical arrangements for the designated psalm tones used for the Magnificat. Anglican composers did, however, face this challenge regularly, and without a specified melody to serve as a starting point. Charles Villiers Stanford provides a particularly good example, as he composed settings of the Magnificat in every key. Here are his Magnificat settings in G and in C sung by the Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge; his Magnificat in A sung by the Manchester Cathedral Choir; and the one in B flat sung by the Choir of Winchester Cathedral.³

1. As with "Mary's Song," the Gospel of Luke does not indicate that the words had a musical character when first uttered.
2. The Episcopal Church in the United States is the US equivalent of the Anglican Church or Church of England in the UK.
3. The [Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge](#), shared their music on their own YouTube channel. That choir has released complete [albums](#) with settings of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Evening Canticles). The performance by the Manchester Cathedral Choir was provided to YouTube by the Orchard Enterprises. The



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performance by the Choir of Winchester Cathedral was released by the [Hyperion](#) label. These videos were created by an anonymous YouTuber who combined the music in question with the score of the work.



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[Hubert Parry](#) has also composed a significant body of choral work for the Church of England, including settings of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. We have mentioned [the music of Herbert Howells](#) already in chapter 11 on David. He also composed [twenty](#) settings of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. Compare these two recordings.⁴



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4. The *Magnificat Collegium Regale* is performed by the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, conducted by Stephen Cleobury, licensed to YouTube by UMG (on behalf of Universal Music). His 1918 setting of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis is performed by the Collegiate Singers. The music is provided to YouTube by the Orchard Enterprises.

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=47#oembed-6>

If you'd like to listen to still more contrasting examples by the same composer, [George Dyson](#) set the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis three times.⁵



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=47#oembed-7>



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

5. The Magnificat in C minor by George Dyson is sung by the Choristers of Lichfield Cathedral. Licensed to YouTube by the Orchard Music. The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis by George Dyson are here performed by the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, conducted by Stephen Cleobury. Licensed to YouTube by Kontor New Music Media. The Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in F by George Dyson are performed by the Guildford Cathedral Choir, directed by Barry Rose, in a recording made at Evensong at Guildford Cathedral, July 17, 1967.

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=47#oembed-8>



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=47#oembed-9>

Notice the way composers find a fresh approach to the same text. To begin with, they tend to write each new setting in a different key. Sometimes they opt for minor as a variation from major, immediately giving a different feel. If in one the melody begins ascending, they may make sure they are doing something different next time by descending initially. They do not simply hope that the new work will emerge and be different from previous settings; rather, they appear to have imposed constraints on themselves to move them in such directions. Even if your own creative endeavors during your life may not be musical in character, the same principles can help you find fresh approaches to what might otherwise be repetitive situations. If you are giving a talk on a topic that you have spoken about before or creating a commercial for a product that you have advertised before, forcing yourself to approach the familiar in a new way may make the difference between innovation and tedium.

If you'd like to listen to more, here are some you may enjoy, as they provide further evidence of just how different the mood and style can be even when setting the same words in the same era: [Ruth Watson Henderson](#), [Alan Hovhaness](#), [Roxanna Panufnik](#), [Ēriks Ešenvalds](#), [Vladimír Godár](#), [Bryan Kelly](#), [James Whitbourn](#), [Gabriel](#)

[Jackson](#), [Craig Phillips](#), [Naji Hakim](#), [Ruth Gipps](#), [William Mathias](#), [Martin Palmeri](#), and [Oliver Tarney](#).⁶ There are also settings in a contemporary song style (as opposed to those for choral singing), such as that by [John Michael Talbot](#), as well as paraphrases such as the “[Canticle of the Turning](#)” by [Rory Cooney](#), which is set to a famous folk tune often sung with the words “The Star of the County Down” but has an earlier name with a biblical connection, “[Dives and Lazarus](#)” (Dives being the traditional name for the rich man in the parable in [Luke 16:19–31](#)). That melody has been explored in a set of [variations by Ralph Vaughan Williams](#).

For Further Reading

Hendrickson, Peter A., Bradley C. Jenson, and Randi H. Lundell. *Luther and Bach on the Magnificat for Advent and Christmas*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015.

6. See also the account of experiencing musical inspiration in connection with his Evening Canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis) by Howard Goodall, “Music and Mystery,” in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 31–33.

18. Our Father

In this chapter you will

- hear from a contemporary composer about how his religious background and experience living in Latvia during the Soviet era impacted his musical expression
- discover how this famous prayer became not only a hit song but the theme music of a very popular video game

The prayer that Jesus is supposed to have taught is variously known as the “Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father,” the latter also contributing the name to a number of works of music, sometimes in the form of the [Latin “Pater Noster”](#) or [Slavonic “Отче Наш.”](#) [Igor Stravinsky’s setting](#) can be found with text in both languages.

Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks shared his thoughts on the Bible’s place in his life and work as a composer, mentioning his own setting of the Pater Noster in the process. He writes,

I was born in a Baptist pastor’s family in an atheistic state (my country Latvia was occupied several times in the twentieth century—the Soviet occupation [1940–41], the Nazi occupation [1941–44], and again the Soviet

occupation [1944–91]). I won't try to describe how much pastors and their families suffered during the decades of Communist tyranny.

I spent my childhood in a Baptist church in a small Latvian town. Three words were written in the central place of our church: "God is Love." Sure, my first compositions were with sacral texts. My father often encouraged me to write "Our Father" that could be sung by his congregation. My father had already passed away when I was finally ready for this most important opus. First in Latvian, then I wrote a version in Latin. My "Our Father" became a prayer for my own father and our common Father.

Although my "Our Father" (Pater Noster) is pretty democratic, it can't be sung by a congregation.

When Latvia finally regained independence, there was a new possibility to create and perform sacral music (ironically, suddenly also these composers who previously had praised the Communist Party and its leaders became very religious, true believers).

Among my sacral opuses there are vocal as well as instrumental works. *Missa* for mixed choir and string orchestra or organ—of course, with canonical texts. *Te Deum*—for organ solo—solely an instrumental opus. *Dona Nobis Pacem*—for choir and orchestra or organ. But *Credo*—again solely an instrumental opus for a big symphony orchestra. I could continue this list, but most important to my mind is that every single opus brings a passionate message about the existence of the spiritual

dimension. About Faith, Hope, and Love. The most important is Love, as the Holy Scripture suggests.

The way of creating music is different to every single composer, I believe. Composing an opus is a long-lasting process for me; it could be compared to carrying a baby. I sometimes call my compositions my babies.

I believe that every opus, created in love, can give more light to the world. I believe the Creator speaks to us also through music. I have lived in this world for a long time now and have understood—the biggest power of the world is Love. As it was written in my childhood church—God is Love.¹

Listen to Vask's setting of the prayer.²



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=48#oembed-1>

1. Shared by the composer with the author, who is thankful to Gundega Vaska for translating it into English.
2. Performance by the [Motetten-Chor Region Basel](#), accompanied by the string orchestra Les Tempéraments and Thomas Schmid on organ, conducted by Ambros Ott. For a different rendition, here is [a performance by an unaccompanied vocal quartet](#).

Franz Liszt has also set this prayer for choir.³



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Liszt is most famous as a piano virtuoso, and his Hungarian Rhapsodies are probably his best known works as a composer. Toward the end of his life, he moved personally as well as compositionally in a direction connected with the church, and in that period, he wrote not only the above but settings of a number of [psalms](#), [Ave Maria](#), and [Via Crucis](#) (exploring the story of Jesus's Passion).

There are versions for use in communal singing in churches and for soloists to perform. One [famous example](#) can be heard performed by [Elvis](#) or [the Beach Boys](#). The prayer became a hit pop song in the version written by Arnold Strals and recorded in 1973 by Sister Janet Mead.⁴



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3. This 2016 performance of Liszt's *Pater Noster* is by the Chamber Choir Weimar, conducted by Maximilian Lörzer, who shared the video to YouTube.
4. Video recording from 1973 of Sister Janet Mead's "The Lord's Prayer." The author has thus far been unable to trace the source of the video.

from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=48#oembed-3>

Christopher Tin's setting of the Lord's Prayer in Swahili, "Baba Yetu," will be familiar to those who played the famous computer game *Civilization IV*.⁵



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In addition to this prayer Jesus taught to his disciples and those in the Psalms, other biblical prayers have been set to music, as well as words from the Bible that have been taken up and woven into prayer—for instance, "Ave Maria" (based on the words with which the angel Gabriel greets Mary in Luke 1:28, 42). That prayer and the setting thereof to music could be the focus of a book-length study in its own right. There are settings by some of the most famous composers of all time, yet composers who are relatively unknown have also created beautiful settings that do not deserve to be neglected among the sheer abundance. For a small sampling, listen to those by [Mikołaj Zielencki](#), [Adrian Willaert](#), Jacques

5. Recording shared by the composer Christopher Tin on his own YouTube channel. Performed by the Soweto Gospel Choir together with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Arcadelt, [Franz Schubert](#) (arguably the most famous), [Anton Bruckner](#), [Antonín Dvořák](#), [Théodore Dubois](#) (the link is to one of three settings by him), [César Franck](#), [Gabriel Fauré \(op. 67\)](#), [Laura Netzel \(op. 41\)](#), [Edward Elgar \(op. 2, no. 2\)](#), [Gustav Holst](#), [Alan Hovhaness \(op. 100, no. 1a\)](#), [Igor Stravinsky](#), [Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský](#), [Rihards Dubra](#), [Leone Sinigaglia](#), [Paul Creston \(op. 57\)](#), [Fartein Valen \(op. 4\)](#), [Morten Lauridsen](#), [Knut Nystedt \(op. 110\)](#), [Vladimir Vavilov \(attributed to Giulio Caccini\)](#), [Paweł Łukaszewski](#), [Einojuhani Rautavaara](#), [R. Nathaniel Dett](#), [Michael Head](#), [Colin Mawby](#), [Scott Solak](#), [Hugh Benham](#), [Karl Jenkins](#), [Joshua Himes](#), [David MacIntyre](#), [Cecilia McDowall](#), [Ferenc Farkas](#), [Michał Lorenc](#), and [David Conte](#). These are fascinating for so many reasons, including the sheer diversity of music created to explore the same words as well as the way that words from the Bible have been combined with others and become part of a prayer that has been rejected by Protestants (who do not pray to Mary), and yet very often the musical work has been appreciated nonetheless by those who would never utter the words themselves as a prayer. In one case of denominational boundary crossing, [Charles Gounod took music by J. S. Bach, a Protestant, and turned it into one of the most famous settings of Ave Maria of all time!](#)

For Further Reading

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19. Revelation

In this chapter you will

- learn that the book of Revelation is where most song lyrics in the New Testament are to be found concentrated in a single work
- consider examples of words and ideas from Revelation that appear in rock music
- learn the story behind an extremely popular and widely used Christian worship song
- learn why a famous quartet's title derives from Revelation
- consider why texts from the end of the book of Revelation are set to music more frequently than other parts

Introduction: Music in Revelation

There is a lot of music in the book of Revelation, sometimes referred to as the Apocalypse of St. John, in addition to [settings](#) of parts of it to music throughout history. *Apocalypse* is the transliteration of a Greek word that means “revelation, unveiling, or disclosure,” so these are just two different ways of rendering the name, one transliterating while the other translates the meaning. Some who read the book are so fixated on what they believe to be predictions

of the end of the world, the “last things” or “end times,” that they miss the prominent presence of singing in the book and thus may be surprised by how often texts from Revelation have been set to music. In fact, noticing the singing within the book may clue us in to what it is really about: a contrast between the heavenly worship in which those faithful to God participate and the worship of the Roman emperor. The misperception that it is about our future and the end of the world explains why we so frequently hear people get the title wrong and call it the “book of Revelations,” as though it were a collection of predictions and secrets about things still to come. There is no s on the end of the title. The single “revelation” is one that the book says was given to someone named John in the first century about things that were going on in his and that “must soon take place” ([Revelation 1:1](#); [22:6](#)). Two thousand years later is not “soon,” and the fixation on a futurist reading of the book seriously distorts our understanding of it. If we stop and take time to listen to the music, on the other hand, you will notice that the book is focused on contrasting worship. In heaven, with much singing, worship is offered “to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb” ([Revelation 5:13](#)). On earth, on the other hand, many worship the “beast,” who represents the Roman emperor and the demand that Christians participate in the imperial cult, which was considered an important sign of loyalty and was crucial to maintaining the stability of the Roman Empire. The heavenly singing is what the faithful on earth should aspire to emulate and participate in, directing their worship at the one true God even in an environment that might persecute and even execute them for this exclusive allegiance.

666 in Rock 'n' Roll

When it comes to music that draws on the book of Revelation, an impressive number of [examples are in the realm of rock music](#). Perhaps the most famous example is in the genre of heavy metal:

Iron Maiden's "Number of the Beast," which draws selectively on parts of Revelation, apparently having been [inspired by the movie Damien: The Omen II \(or more precisely, a nightmare](#) that ensued after seeing it).¹ That series of movies in turn draws selectively on biblical sources to weave a frightening tale about "the Antichrist"—a title that in fact never occurs in the book of Revelation. When it occurs in [1 John 2:18](#), it adds a plural form of the word, suggesting there is no single "Antichrist" but a type of figure. Iron Maiden's (and these movies') exploration of this topic is thus no more and no less biblical than some examples from the realm of "classical" music, such as [Rued Langgaard's Antikrist](#). The use of the Bible in the [libretto](#) of that work is worth exploring in detail.

I wonder whether Peter Gabriel might ever have sung [Charles Villiers Stanford's "And I Saw Another Angel"](#) in chapel at Charterhouse School, where the founding members of the band Genesis met. Gabriel and others mention the influence of hymns on their songwriting and music, and Gabriel drew directly from the same part of the book of Revelation for the words to the climax of the song "[Supper's Ready](#)."²

1. The song "Number of the Beast" (on an album with the same title) led some to denounce and protest the band, accusing them of Satan worship, which band members have pointed out shows that they did not bother to listen to or read the lyrics to the song, nor those of another track on the album with a biblical reference but largely nonbiblical lyrics, "Hallowed Be Thy Name." Other heavy metal bands have faced similar issues: see the discussion of Metallica's song "Creeping Death" [in chapter 10 on Exodus](#).
2. On this, see further Sarah Hill, "Ending It All: Genesis and Revelation," *Popular Music* 32, no. 2 (2013): 197–221. The song can be found on YouTube, including in the form of [recordings of classic live performances](#) by Genesis.

Hymns, Choruses, and Other Church Music

Given that parts of the book of Revelation may draw on early Christian songs, it is fitting that from time to time the words have been turned back into songs for use in the setting of Christian worship. Far more hymns draw selectively on phrases and themes than actually stick close to words found in Revelation. Among those that do, the best known today is perhaps [“Thou Art Worthy”](#) by Pauline Mills. It was written in 1963, and the [story of its creation](#) that has circulated, if true, is quite remarkable. The songwriter’s son was a pastor, and prior to a visit to the church by his mother (of whose musical ability he was understandably proud), Rev. Mills told the congregation that they could suggest a favorite passage of Scripture to his mother at the start of a service, and by the end she would have set it to music. He did not warn his mother of this, however, so she was surprised to learn of her son’s promise when she arrived. Yet she rose to the occasion, and at the prompting of a member of the congregation whose favorite verse was [Revelation 4:11](#), she produced a song that is still widely sung today.³

Instrumental Revelation

A well-known instrumental work that derives its title and inspiration from the book of Revelation is Olivier Messiaen’s [Quatuor pour le Fin du Temps](#), or “Quartet for the End of Time,”

3. Another example of the use of words directly from Revelation in a worship song is “To Him Who Sits on the Throne,” written by Debbye Graafsma, which appeared on the rock band Petra’s album *Petra Praise 2*.

alluding to [Revelation 10:6](#), where an angel declares that “time should be time no longer” (KJV) or, as the Common English Bible puts it, “the time is up.” [Messiaen composed and then first performed the work in a Nazi camp for prisoners of war](#) during World War II. In that context, Revelation’s hope for an end to human history in its present form and its replacement with the kingdom of God would have naturally resonated with the composer, although arguably so too could a desire for time to simply end altogether (as a literal interpretation of the title might imply).⁴



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=49#oembed-1>

Another example of an instrumental exploration of Revelation is [Edward Gregson’s *Music of the Angels*](#) (as well as a couple of [earlier works](#) that laid the groundwork for it). It is not surprising that a work would be composed for brass instruments based on the description of angels playing trumpets in the book of Revelation.⁵

4. Olivier Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* is here performed by Antje Weithaas on violin, Sol Gabetta on cello, Sabine Meyer on clarinet, and Bertrand Chamayou on piano. Filmed at Solsberg Festival 2016 and shared on YouTube by the Hochrhein Musikfestival.
5. The trumpeting angels are also mentioned in the Genesis song “Supper’s Ready,” where they are said to play “sweet rock ’n’ roll.”

Alpha and Omega (and Everything in Between)

Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and thus when those letters are mentioned in the book of Revelation, it is the equivalent of saying “from A to Z” in English. Few works attempt to explore the entire span of the book of Revelation in music.⁶ One of the few exceptions is *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (The Book with Seven Seals) by Franz Schmidt. The composer is reported to have said of the work, “If my setting succeeds in bringing this unprecedented poetry, whose topicality now, after eighteen and a half hundred years, is as great as it was on the first day, to the listener of today, then this will be my best reward.”⁷ Although the language and turns of phrase that characterize the book of Revelation may seem quite unique to many modern readers, the book actually draws much of its distinctive imagery from the Old Testament / Jewish Scripture. Nor is it the first or only work that might be placed in the category of apocalyptic literature. It would be fascinating to hear what composers who were motivated to set some or all of Revelation to music because of its perceived uniqueness might do with other apocalyptic texts were they to discover them. For now, however, simply have a listen to Schmidt’s setting.⁸

6. Even Pierre Henry’s very unusual work with narration does not include everything. You can listen to [Pierre Henry’s Apocalypse de Jean on YouTube](#).
7. [Quoted by Wolfgang-Paul-Saal](#).
8. Franz Schmidt’s *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* is performed by the Danish National Symphony Orchestra and Danish National Concert Choir, conducted by Fabio Luisi. It was recorded at DR Concert Hall on December 2017 and shared by the venue to their YouTube channel.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=49#oembed-2>

Hilding Rosenberg's Symphony no. 4, "Johannes Uppenbarelse" (The Revelation of John) includes [text from Revelation interspersed with poems by Hjalmar Gullberg](#) that are inspired by and allude to Revelation, making for a multilayered treatment of Revelation that bridges the ancient text with the composer's time.⁹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=49#oembed-3>

Paul Manz's "[E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come](#)" combines small segments of text from toward the beginning and end of Revelation.¹⁰

9. Håkan Hagegård, baritone, is the soloist in this performance of Hilding Rosenberg's Symphony no. 4 by the Swedish Radio Choir and Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sixten Ehrling. Licensed to YouTube by Naxos Digital Services US.
10. The Exultate Choir, conducted by Thomas Rossin, performed this work by Paul Manz in memory of the composer, who passed away in 2009.



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The end of Revelation, with its climactic vision of a new creation, is especially popular with composers, far more so than the sections about plagues and judgments coming upon the earth and its human inhabitants. [Edgar Bainton's "And I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth"](#) is a setting of part of chapter 21.¹¹



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Finally (as far as the musical examples included in the chapter are concerned), here is [Will Todd's](#) gentle ["No More Sorrow,"](#) which succeeds in emphasizing the comforting message of the book of Revelation and, in particular, its climax through an extremely effective and moving wedding of words and music.¹²

11. This recording of Bainton's "And I Saw a New Heaven" by Bath Abbey Girls' Choir, conducted by Huw Williams, is shared on YouTube by CHOR GESANG music magazine for the occasion of Remembrance Day 2020.
12. "No More Sorrow" by Will Todd was shared on YouTube by



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=49#oembed-6>

For a discussion of the “[Hallelujah Chorus](#),” the text of which is drawn from the book of Revelation, see chapter 28 about Handel’s Messiah. [Brahms’s Triumphlied](#) (Song of Triumph) is based on the same part of Revelation, chapter 19.¹³ As with all of the Bible, there are more examples than we can name, much less discuss in a way that might do justice to them.¹⁴

For Further Reading

Exposure TV to promote the release of the album *Lux et Veritas: Music for Peace and Reflection*.

13. On this work and its relationship to current events in the time it was composed, see Daniel Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 77–78.
14. A few examples include James MacMillan’s “[Alpha and Omega](#),” Patrick Hawes’s [Revelation](#), and [Knut Nystedt’s](#) *Apocalypsis Joannis*. The latter’s *Seven Seals: Vision for Orchestra*, op. 76, should also be noted. I will also draw attention to [James Whitbourn’s “He Carried Me Away in the Spirit.”](#) Whitbourn has also explored the ending of Revelation in his “Pure Water of Life.” Other biblical settings by the same composer include his “Magnificat,” “Nunc Dimittis,” and “Alleluia jubilate.”

Pople, Anthony. *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Seel, Thomas Allen. *A Theology of Music for Worship Derived from the Book of Revelation*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1995.

Wallin, Nils. L. "Hilding Rosenbergs Johannes uppenbarelse." *DMT* 27, no. 1 (1952): 15–20.

20. Alleluias and Allusions

In this chapter you will

- consider what constitutes an allusion to the Bible
- be introduced to a fun activity for exploring the Bible in popular music
- consider a few specific examples of popular music's engagement with the Bible

What Is an Allusion?

One of the activities that is a regular part of my course on the Bible and music is a scavenger hunt in which I ask students to search for allusions (i.e., indirect references) to the Bible in secular popular music. First, however, we have to tackle the question of what constitutes an “allusion.” It isn’t an easy question to answer. Many songs include the word *God*, for instance, but the fact that the word occurs often in English translations of the Bible doesn’t make it an allusion to the Bible. The same may be said of the title *Lord*.

Hallelujah/Alleluia

What about the word *hallelujah*? For many people, Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah" is the first thing to come to mind at the intersection of that word and music (whether performed by him or covered by any number of other artists, such as Pentatonix). [The song is full of biblical allusions](#) (and some who have wished to harness the song's popularity for sacred use have provided new lyrics). We also find *hallelujah* (and *Lord*) together in the song "[My Sweet Lord](#)" by George Harrison of the Beatles. In addition to the word *hallelujah*, it also features the Hindu [mantra](#) (repeated phrase) "[hare Krishna](#)." The song aims to convey that [Jewish, Christian, and Hindu mantras are in essence the same](#).

While undoubtedly biblical in origin, in different translations, the frequency with which the word *hallelujah* appears differs significantly. *Hallelujah* only occurs in Revelation in the [NIV](#), where it is found four times. The same goes for *alleluia* in the [NKJV](#). It occurs in Revelation plus in [Tobit](#) and [3 Maccabees](#) in the NRSV. In other translations, such as the [International Standard Version](#), the word also occurs in the Hebrew Bible, where it is found only in the Psalms—or rather, these two words are found, since the word is in fact a transliteration of two Hebrew words meaning "praise Yah," often rendered as "praise the Lord." Psalm 104 is the first occurrence in the Hebrew Bible and Psalm 150 the last.

The famous [setting of Psalm 150 by Louis Lewandowski](#) features the word prominently and often and is thus given the title "Hallelujah."¹

1. Out-of-print recording by the Zemel Choir of Louis Lewandowski's piece, shared to YouTube on the Salt & Pepper Jewish Music channel.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=50#oembed-1>

Below is the same choir performing another song called “Hallelujah” and features that word more frequently than any other.² This song in Hebrew [won the 1979 Eurovision song contest](#).



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=50#oembed-2>

[Amy Gordon](#) has set just the word *alleluia* to music.³ This makes it more difficult to know whether it should be considered a biblical allusion. The word is sometimes found even in nonreligious contexts as an outburst of joy, relief, and gratitude. Gordon’s setting is intended for liturgical use. Is this sufficient for it to be considered an allusion to the Bible? What do you think?



2. Shared by the Zemel Choir on their own YouTube channel.
3. The score video was shared by composer Amy Gordon to her own YouTube channel.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=50#oembed-3>

Amen

Another single word that is biblical and yet does not always appear in contexts that have the Bible remotely in mind is *amen*. The word comes into English from Hebrew and is from a root that is related to truthfulness, faithfulness, and confidence. Christians often define it as “so be it,” yet when Jesus says “Amen I say to you” in the Gospels, it is usually rendered as “Truly I say to you.”

[Hosier’s “Take Me to Church”](#) is an example of the word appearing in a song that, however much religious imagery it may contain, is probably to be considered not a biblical allusion but rather an allusion to the use of the word in churches. That use, of course, ultimately derives from the Bible. This makes it challenging to know when one is dealing with a biblical allusion. Phrases like “go the extra mile” and “turn the other cheek” stem from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew ([5:38–40](#)) but have become part of the English language to such an extent that one can use them without having the Bible in mind or even being aware that that is where they came from.

Here is a setting of just the word *amen* for choir by Henryk Górecki.⁴ How would you decide whether this work is or is not

4. This is performed by the Choir of King’s College, Cambridge,

alluding to the Bible? Is it even possible to tell? Does the intention of the composer matter? What do you think?



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=50#oembed-4>

Still other factors may contribute to ambiguity about whether a piece of music alludes to the Bible. Russian composer [Sergei Taneyev wrote a cantata that set the text of a poem, “On the Reading of a Psalm.”](#)⁵ The poem takes inspiration from at least one biblical psalm, [Psalm 50](#), but the text of the poem is not derived directly from the Bible. As Frances Maes writes,

Sergei Taneyev based his final choral composition on a poem by Alexey Stepanovich Khomyakov, dating from 1856. The poet was a member of the group of Slavophile philosophers, together with Sergei Aksakov and the brothers Kireyevsky. The poem is a personal meditation following the reading of the fiftieth Psalm. In biblical words, Khomyakov continues the line of thought of the

conducted by Stephen Cleobury; provided to YouTube by Warner Classics; and shared on the choir’s own YouTube channel.

5. Whereas this is Taneyev’s last choral composition, his first was a setting of a biblical psalm, [Psalm 66](#).

psalm. As He did in the model, God again appears during a storm and speaks directly to his people. In the original psalm, God condemns the burnt offerings brought to Him by His people. Burnt offerings are useless and hypocritical, if they are not combined with the keeping of God's commandments. In God's eyes, only the gift of gratitude is valid. Khomyakov then goes on to ruminate on the contrast between the outward appearances of religious "behaviour" and the inner attitude required by God. God does not ask for temples, gold, incense or burnt offerings. They add nothing to what He already possesses in His omnipotence. God requires the deep-down, human qualities: purity of heart, perseverance in work, brotherly love and justice.

Taneyev's musical treatment of the work makes it clear that the composer's approach to the text was based on the same two ideas that Beethoven had: on the one side, the greatness of God's creations and, on the other, human morality.⁶

Taneyev has thus set a text that takes inspiration from the Bible, but a work inspired by a particular text need not necessarily *allude* to that text—depending on how one defines an allusion. So you can see how complex a question this is. Looking for and thinking about allusions to the Bible in music can help us think about the topic of allusions (and [intertextuality](#) more generally).

Many musical works have *psalm* in the title but are not

6. Francis Maes, "Sergei Taneyev: At the Reading of a Psalm," [Pentatone Classics PTC 5186 038: Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev 2004](#).

biblical in character at all. The question of what constitutes a “biblical” psalm is further complicated by the fact that we have ancient manuscripts that contain psalms that are not in most or any modern Bibles, sometimes in a collection that also includes biblical Psalms. Hopefully all of this makes clear that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to define precisely what constitutes an allusion to the Bible. If you think you spot one, make the case for it deserving this label!

Examples from Secular Music

One of my favorite examples of a biblical allusion in popular music is found in the song “We Are the World.” Despite knowing the music of the 1980s rather well, a student in my class pointed out to me something I had never noticed.⁷ The lyrics refer to “turning stones to bread.” About this, [Gavin Edwards wrote the following in Rolling Stone](#):

With a squint, Nelson delivers the oddest line in the song: “As God has shown us, by turning stone to bread.” Actually, there is no Biblical passage where God transforms stone to bread, although He gets a shout-out for bringing forth all food from the Earth in Psalms 104. In Matthew 4, however, the Devil comes to Jesus Christ in the desert after he’s been fasting for 40 days, and trying to tempt him, tells him that he should change the stones into bread. Christ spurns him with the aphorism “Man shall not live on bread alone.” So the Bible seems to be against turning stone into bread (not that it comes up often as an option in most people’s lives).

7. I am grateful to Katelyn Kahn for drawing this example to my attention.

In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus writes about John of Leyden, who in 1535 told the people of Munster, Germany, suffering from a blockade, that God would turn the city's cobblestones into bread. People tried to eat the cobblestones, and found that they were not feeling groovy. The bottom line: when people are suffering from famine, it seems cruel to bring up the possibility of stones being edible.⁸

[Another online article by Mark Tapio Kines suggests that the inclusion of these words is a “factual error”](#) of a kind that is common in song lyrics. There was presumably no intention on the part of Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, who coauthored the lyrics, to link this humanitarian effort with temptation by the devil. After all, if we consider the related example of “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” we find [blunder](#) after blunder. For instance, people in and from Africa knew it was Christmas long before Christianity reached anyone in or from the English-speaking world. The continent has rivers, vegetation, and yes, even snow.⁹ Why should this follow-up fundraising song not also have at least one major blunder in it too? [Eric Mataxas](#) has also [commented on the lyrics to “We Are the World”](#) and thinks it is evidence of the profound ignorance of the Bible among secular pop stars. In theory, this is not an implausible explanation, since it is definitely true even outside the realm of songwriting that people think they are more familiar with what the Bible says than they actually are. However, given that the main lyricist was Michael Jackson, who was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, I’m not convinced that this was simply a mistake. If we [take a look](#)

8. Gavin Edwards, “‘We Are the World’: A Minute-by-Minute Breakdown,” *Rolling Stone*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/we-are-the-world-a-minute-by-minute-breakdown-54619/>.
9. For those unfamiliar with the song, the lyrics say, “There won’t be snow in Africa this Christmas time....Where nothing ever grows, No rain nor rivers flow, Do they know it’s Christmas time at all?”

[at what that organization has to say about the passage in Matthew 4](#), we read things like the following: “Knowing that it is wrong to use his miraculous powers to satisfy his personal desires, Jesus rejects that temptation.” I suspect that many would view the multiplication of the loaves and fishes as precisely the same sort of miracle—except aimed at taking care of others and therefore appropriate.

And so [I think](#) that the inclusion of the words “turning stones to bread” was most likely not a mistake but something else.¹⁰ Perhaps it is an effort to connect biblical imagery of the provision of an abundance of food with the need to turn stony ground in an area of famine into something else. If so, the words in the song probably express the conviction that, since Jesus said that God is a loving father, and even a human father would not give his child who asks for bread a stone ([Matthew 7:9](#)), God can and sometimes does perform this kind of miracle, with the issue in Jesus’s temptation being the timing and motivation rather than the appropriateness of the action per se. Whatever one concludes about this particular example, it is definitely the case that even when popular music contains potentially erroneous or imprecise allusions to the Bible, the song lyrics can still be interesting to examine, perhaps all the more so precisely because of the possible error.

Satan or the devil comes up quite a bit in popular music, in a variety of ways. Once again, not all such references allude to the Bible, since the figure of Satan and ideas about devils and demons are mentioned outside the Bible as well. Satan appears in the video for Lil Nas X’s song “Montero (Call Me by Your Name).” The lyrics refer to Eve, and the video depicts the Garden of Eden. There is definitely a biblical allusion in the song, and this connection is elaborated further in the video. Yet Satan does not appear in the story in Genesis 3 that is echoed here. The introduction of the

10. The ideas explored here draw from [a blog post I wrote in 2018](#) soon after this detail in “We Are the World” came to my attention.

figure of Satan into the Garden of Eden story represents a later reinterpretation of the snake or serpent, who is explicitly said to be one of the beasts of the field (rather than a supernatural being) in [Genesis 3:1](#).

Just as the Bible and religious influences make themselves felt in popular music, the reverse also happens, such as when churches have celebrated a [Beyoncé Mass](#) or [U2charist](#). [Rev. Prof. Yolanda Norton](#) has taught a course called [Beyoncé and the Hebrew Bible](#) that goes beyond just looking for and at allusions to a deeper consideration of [themes shared in common](#). Also worth exploring is [Professor Delvyn Case's website dedicated to Jesus in popular music](#). Case writes there, "I've been studying this fascinating collection of songs for over 10 years. My goal has been to use them as a lens through which to examine the ways in which our modern secular society views and understands Jesus: his character, identity, message, and meaning. Along the way I've learned some fascinating things that have deeply affected not only my understanding of American Christian history but also my own faith."¹¹ That website offers musical examples as well as commentary on them, plus a fuller database of all the music that Case has found that fits into this category, a resource that will continue to grow.

There is more than one way to approach the relationship of the Bible to popular music!

For Further Reading

11. Delvyn Case, "Rock of Ages: Jesus in Popular Songs," accessed September 14, 2022, <https://www.delvyncase.com/jesus>.

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2I. Biblical Music without Words

In this chapter you will

- hear from contemporary composers (one of whose famous “[Piano Puzzlers](#)” you may have heard on the radio)
- reflect on whether and how music can explore biblical texts without actually incorporating human voices singing the words of those texts

Contemporary composer Bruce Adolphe shared the following thoughts on music and spirituality, which are relevant to this topic:

What does it mean to say that a piece of music is *spiritual*? If the work is a setting of a biblical text, does that make the music automatically “spiritual”? I don’t think so. The setting of sacred words to music may serve a religious purpose or supply music for a ritual, but the question here is whether the music itself sounds and feels “spiritual” without the words. Can wordless music be spiritual? If by spiritual, we mean that the music profoundly affects us and moves us to

contemplate our place in the world, our humanity, our frailty, life and death, if we mean that it takes us to the still point where our selves disappear and where we may experience grief and wonder, then yes, music can most certainly do that. Music that disturbs the surface of our daily routine, that disrupts our ordinary experience of time, may have spiritual resonance. Music so honest, so personal that it feels universal, is likely to impart a spiritual aspect. If there is something in the music that is not immediately comprehensible, we may perceive it as mysterious. The mysterious message is encoded in the resonance, register, timbre, rhythm, melodic arc, and dynamics—in all the parameters of musical utterance. If you put ordinary, simple words to this music, they would seem trivial and wrong; they would remind you that words and music abide in different regions of the brain. Music can never be as specific as a particular theology, and because of that, it can sound infinitely more spiritual than any religious text, which by the nature of its specificity permanently resides on the surface of the deeper ocean of feeling that is music.¹

Sometimes a work will have program notes or other added text that is not part of the music and yet exists alongside it. Those explanatory words prompt listeners who read them to interpret what they hear in certain ways. [Joseph Haydn composed a work for string quartet that explores the “Seven Last Words of Christ.”](#) The composer had this to say in a letter he wrote to his publisher

1. Personal correspondence with the author, who is very grateful for this contribution to this book.

about the piece: “Each Sonata, or rather each setting of the text, is expressed only by instrumental music, but in such a way that it creates the most profound impression even on the most inexperienced listener.”²

There can be connections not only through the title or appended explanatory comments but also through allusions to or use of one or more melodies from earlier works. An example that includes several of these framing and interpretive devices is Arthur Bliss’s “Meditation on a Theme by John Blow.” [Andrew Clements writes](#) of that work, “Bliss bases the piece on [Blow’s setting of Psalm 23](#), not so much as a set of variations but as a series of commentaries, some untroubled and pastoral, others dark and threatening. It’s touchingly effective.” [Guy Rickards opines](#), “If Sir Arthur Bliss wrote a finer work than the *Meditations on a Theme of John Blow* (1955), I would like to hear it. A beautifully balanced set of expanded variations on a theme from the *Sinfonia* to Blow’s setting of Psalm 23, Bliss’s score is a glowing exhibition of his compositional prowess. Its sequence of Introduction, five Meditations, Interlude and Finale bear superscriptions from the psalm—excepting the scherzando third meditation, ‘Lambs’—which colour the characters of each section.”

If you have never heard the piece before, listen to it once without reading Bliss’s notes, and then listen again while or after reading his [program notes for the piece](#).³

2. Quoted by Shawn T. Eaton, “[How the Composer’s Worldview Shapes Musical Meaning: Haydn’s Creation and the Enlightenment](#),” *Artistic Theologian* 5 (2017): 23–24. The letter to his publisher, William Forster, is dated April 8, 1787. You may also wish to listen to the [introductory comments provided by Michael Parloff](#) prior to a performance of this work.
3. The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra is conducted by Hugo Rignold. Licensed to YouTube by Naxos.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-1>

[Ernst Toch explored the story of Jephthah and his daughter in a rhapsodic poem](#) after reading a novel that explored their story beyond the small amount said about them in the book of Judges.⁴ He had planned to compose a work with words, but the librettist took too long, in his opinion. In addition to illustrating how music may engage with challenging biblical material (Jephthah kills his own daughter as a human sacrifice), this case also illustrates that composers of music, like authors who write words and others engaged in creative activity, do not completely control their own creative activity. Ideas emerge from the subconscious, at times unbidden, and one either makes a record of them and does something with them or risks losing them to forgetfulness. You can listen to Toch's work, also categorized as his Symphony no. 5, performed here by the Louisville Orchestra.⁵



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4. See also [chapter 27 on musical, oratorio, and opera](#) for other explorations of the story of Jephthah.
5. *Jephta* by Ernst Toch is here performed by the Louisville Orchestra, conducted by Robert Whitney. Provided to YouTube by the Orchard Enterprises.

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-2>

Some music without words has other things that combine with it to convey meaning. A major example of this is in music for ballet. American composer [William Schuman wrote ballet music based on the book of Judith](#) (one of the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books).⁶



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-3>

Composer James Lee III drew inspiration from many texts for his work [Sukkot Through Orion's Nebula](#), including Leviticus 23 (where the festival of Sukkot, sometimes called the “Feast of Tabernacles” in English, is mentioned), Revelation, and Job.⁷



6. Seattle Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Gerard Schwarz. Provided to YouTube by Naxos of America and shared on the Seattle Symphony's own YouTube channel.
7. Recording by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra shared by the orchestra on their SoundCloud channel.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-4>

Lee has this to say about the Bible in relation to his own musical creations and compositional process:

There is so much material in the world that a composer may contemplate as a possible source of inspiration for new musical works. When I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan and in the initial stages of my career, I decided that part of my creative output would take direct inspiration from the Word of God, the Bible. Two of my orchestral works that are influenced by the biblical texts include *Beyond Rivers of Vision* and *Sukkot Through Orion's Nebula*. Four chamber works that are directly influenced from the Bible include *Night Visions of Kippur*, *The Appointed Time*, *Piano Trio No. 2 "Temple Visions,"* and *Scenes Upon Eternity's Edge*. As a Christian who spends much time both studying the Bible and teaching the biblical scriptures to others, I have found the imagery and biblical stories to be a rich source of inspiration for several of my compositions. In particular, the books of Daniel and Revelation have been writings to which I have been drawn as I work to create new music. There are so many vivid images described in the prophecies of those books. After I decide on a text, I start to plan the

structure of the new piece. My process as a composer always begins with prayer to Him who created music—Elohim (God). I have strived to combine my musical gift from God and let the Holy Spirit guide me in the journey to create music, which I hope is ultimately to His honor and glory. As much as possible I have wanted my music to reach to the inner soul of the listener. I try to employ harmonies, melodies, rhythms, and instrumental colors in such a way that they stimulate the mind to imagine the scene that is being portrayed in the holy scriptures. At times, I have applied polychords in my harmonic language and utilized a type of layering and textural counterpoint in such a way as to allude to the supernatural, heavenly, and divine. In other instances, the music is written in such a way as to suggest the urgency of the message to the world for preparation to receive the coming Messiah from heaven in all His glory as is depicted in Revelation chapters 14 and 19. In order to be true to the texts, I have tried to provide a musical environment that encapsulates the written words of prophecy.⁸

We have already mentioned Sungji Hong's *Nunc Dimittis*. That is one work that is part of a larger project called [“The Life of Christ.”](#) Many of the works that are part of that project are instrumental explorations of the subject. Here we will provide a couple of examples, but there are many more on the [composer's website](#).

8. Provided in personal correspondence with the author, who is extremely grateful to Lee for providing this information for incorporation into the book.

Hong studied and lived in Greece for several years, and thus a number of the pieces have Greek titles, typically using words that are found in the Greek text (i.e., the original language) of the Gospels. Hong mentions having a preference for verbs as titles and as the starting point for her exploration of the New Testament narratives. She has gravitated toward works for one or only a few instruments to explore the wide range of possibilities of expression each instrument is capable of. Her work for solo flute, “Vidimus Stellam,” means “We Have Seen His Star” and explores the infancy story in chapter 2 of the Gospel of Matthew. Here it is performed by flautist Jennie Oh Brown.⁹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-5>

Hong’s work for solo bass clarinet, “Exevalen,” is inspired by a work of art depicting [the story found in all four New Testament Gospels in which Jesus drives moneychangers and sellers of animals out of the precincts of the Jerusalem temple](#). Hong explains, “The inspiration for this piece is based on the painting *La expulsión de los mercaderes del templo* (The National Gallery in London, UK) by El Greco. *Exevalen* is a Greek word meaning ‘he drove out,’ which I thought of as a word that describes the painting. The title suggests impetuous and dashing gestures that underline the direction of the music.”¹⁰

9. Recorded at Wentz Hall (North Central College). Shared on YouTube by the performer on her own YouTube channel.
10. Information generously provided by the composer, to whom the



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=51#oembed-6>

Many of the [works in Hong's ongoing project "The Life of Christ" were inspired by paintings of biblical scenes](#), illustrating how text, visual arts, and music can intersect and inspire. Hong has not been composing these works in the order of the biblical narrative, but they will ultimately be arranged in chronological sequence when the series is completed. Not all of Hong's works that are part of the project are instrumental, as is already clear from her "Nunc Dimittis." Listen as well to her "[Postea Sciens Jesus](#)," with its title derived from the first three words of [John 19:28](#) ("After this, Jesus knowing...") in Latin. You can explore more music from this project on [Hong's website](#). Nor do the parts of her "The Life of Christ" project exhaust her engagement with the Bible. [Listen](#), for example, to her setting of [Psalm 57, "Awake Up, My Glory."](#)

The present era provides more opportunities than ever before for those who listen to music to hear the perspective of composers and performers on these works. That is especially useful in the case of instrumental works, the title and sound of which might not be enough on their own to convey to listeners the meaning they had for those who created them. Without that, we might miss so much. We would still enjoy the music and find it engaging, to be sure, but at least some of the biblical connections—and other connections, such as with painting or

author is extremely grateful. The recording, featuring Sarah K. Watts on bass clarinet, is shared by the composer on her YouTube channel.

experiences in the life of the composer—would remain unknown to us without the composer’s commentary on their own work.

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22. Bringing Texts Together

In this chapter you will

- explore how new meanings emerge as texts from different literary contexts are combined in the context of a new work
- discover how the choice from among possible texts, as well as their arrangement in relation to one another and their musical accompaniment, conveys meaning and shapes the listener's experience
- consider specific examples by German composer Johannes Brahms and English composer Herbert Howells

We have already mentioned the new layers of meaning that may emerge when several different psalms are selected to become part of one larger work. We shall also have an opportunity in a later chapter to consider one of the most famous instances of multiple texts from all over the Bible being woven together into a single work—namely, Handel's *Messiah*. Here we provide an introduction to how the juxtaposition of different biblical texts, sometimes interwoven with material from outside the Bible, creates new meaning that is at once biblical and goes beyond what any of the texts on their own would likely be understood to mean if considered in isolation.

In later chapters, we will consider not only Handel's *Messiah* but another work that places biblical and extrabiblical

material together: John Rutter's *Requiem*. In chapter 11 about David and those around him, we discussed some music by Herbert Howells. Here we have an opportunity to consider yet [another of Howells's works](#), *Hymnus Paradisi*, which includes words from Psalm 23, Psalm 121, and Revelation together with mass texts and others. It arose out of [Howells's own personal experience](#) of the [tragic death of his son from meningitis](#). [Andrew Green writes about Howells's *Hymnus Paradisi*](#):

Howells was later to describe himself as having been “frozen” by Michael’s death, although he threw himself back into his teaching at the Royal College of Music in an effort to come to terms with the unanswerable. As far as composition was concerned, *Hymnus Paradisi* became what he called “a medical document,” helping him to work through his grief...a deeply personal masterpiece which transfigured that grief into a whole range of emotions—hope, defiance, consolation, even ecstasy—while still giving eloquent expression to the pain of bereavement. For many years it was not realized that *Hymnus* is also in large part a transfiguration of what is now known to be a pre-existing work: Howells’s unaccompanied *Requiem*.

Hymnus Paradisi was finished by 1938, but remained hidden away. It was, Howells said, “a personal, secret document.” Eventually his idol Vaughan Williams encouraged him to offer the work for performance, resulting in a premiere at the Three Choirs Festival in

Gloucester in 1950, almost fifteen years to the day since Michael's death, with Howells conducting.¹



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Howell's song *King David* (which is mentioned in chapter 11 about David) is a meditation on the biblical figure and how music and sorrow related to one another in the story of his life. As such, it relates to the work you just listened to and its connection with Howells's own experience of finding an outlet for his grief in and through music.

Brahms's [*Ein Deutes Requiem*](#) (A German Requiem) is another famous example of texts from the Bible being brought together.² Brahms chose texts based on their theme, often a key

1. Andrew Green's notes appear in the album notes of Chandos Records' 1999 release of the work. The performance in the video embedded here was recorded at the annual Proms concert at the Royal Albert Hall, August 29, 2012, featuring soloists Miah Persson (soprano) and Andrew Kennedy (tenor) together with the BBC Symphony Chorus, London Philharmonic Choir, and BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Martyn Brabbins.
2. Betty Carlson and Jane Stuart Smith, *The Gift of Music: Great Composers and Their Influence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995)

word that connects them, such as the language of sorrow or comfort. A requiem was a traditional mass for the dead with a text in Latin that connects and draws on the Bible in places but is not entirely biblical. Brahms's choice to craft one with words in German drawn only from the Bible reflects the [influence of the Protestant Reformation](#). Brahms's influence by and interest in Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German is well known. While the traditional Catholic requiem was a prayer for the dead, the verses Brahms chose focus on comforting the living who are left behind to mourn. As Michael Steinberg writes,

The words that begin the Mass for the Dead in the Catholic liturgy are "Grant them eternal rest, O Lord" but that is not the concern on Brahms's mind. The dead are not mentioned in "A German Requiem" until the penultimate section, and then it is in the phrase "the dead shall be raised incorruptible." And when the last movement begins with the words from "Revelation," "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth," we hear not anxious or ardent prayer, but the voice of assured faith. Brahms's address is to us, the living who remain to mourn and suffer. The verse from "Revelation" which ends "A German Requiem" closes the circle that begins with the Beatitude "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."³

Daniel Beller-McKenna writes, "The possibility that the promise of comfort might be located simultaneously within human (worldly) time and beyond it in (divine) eternity is central to the temporal framework of the *Requiem* and, by extension, to the work's relevance to broader modes of thinking in nineteenth-century Germany....By personally selecting sixteen separate passages from

140–41, discuss Brahms's religious influences and perspective with particular focus on the *Requiem*.

3. Michael Steinberg, *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.

the Old and New Testaments as the text for the work, Brahms also strongly identified himself in the *Requiem* as a reader of Luther's Bible and—by extension—as a lover of the German language and the Protestant culture in which it developed....Brahms's religiosity is hard to pin down, but it is best described as cultural Protestantism; his deep interest in the words of Luther's Bible, even the faith therein, were more a matter of learned culture than of practiced religion."⁴ Whatever his personal convictions may have been, Brahms's choice of texts provides evidence of the composer's theological as well as musical astuteness. In particular, the parallelism between the blessing upon those who mourn drawn from the Beatitudes early in the work (Matthew 5:4) and the blessing on the dead drawn from Revelation 14:13 toward the end is extremely effective, noting a verbal similarity that lies near the beginning and end of the New Testament and using it to frame the message of his work.⁵



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In later chapters, you will have a chance to take a close look at a couple more works for choir and soloists that bring together

4. Daniel Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 69, 75–76.
5. Beller-McKenna, *Brahms and the German Spirit*, 94–95.
Performance by the New England Conservatory Concert Choir and Philharmonia at Jordan Hall on December 2, 2014, and shared by the New England Conservatory on their own YouTube channel.

a number of texts from the Bible, including (as already mentioned) George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* and also John Rutter's *Requiem*.⁶

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Grimes, Nicole. “Philosophy.” In *Brahms in Context*, edited by Natasha Loges and Katy Hamilton, 277–85. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

6. Many [liturgies](#) incorporate biblical words in key places, although the majority of the words are extrabiblical. Thus one can find diverse biblical and extrabiblical material combined in the [Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom](#), which has been set by composers such as Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov, and the list could go on and on. [Einojuhani Rautavaara's Vigilia](#) also falls in this category. Many other examples could be mentioned, including [William Croft's Burial Service](#), Margaret Allison Bonds's *Scripture Reading*, James Lentini's *Three Sacred Meditations*, Johan Franco's *Seven Biblical Sketches*, and Anthony Milner's [The Water and the Fire](#). In addition, many hymns and contemporary worship songs fit under this heading as well.

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PART III

PEOPLE AND GENRES

In earlier parts of this book, we have often focused on what different composers and songwriters have done with the same text, setting them side by side to compare and contrast. There is also a benefit to focusing on particular individuals and their creative work, looking at what we know of their motivations and interests as well as what texts they chose to set and what they did with them. Often those individuals specialized in or have become famous for particular types of musical settings of biblical material, hence our inclusion of chapters on particular genres in this part of the book, which primarily focuses on individual composers.

23. Hildegard of Bingen

In this chapter you will

- learn about the medieval musical form known as plainsong or plainchant
- understand how rare and valuable it is to have such an extensive literary as well as musical output from a composer in the Middle Ages

Hildegard of Bingen played a leadership role in Christian monasticism; authored commentaries on biblical texts, books of her visions, and more; and composed a great deal of music that continues to be performed today. Although today she is well known for her music, historically her music was neglected and she was more famous as a mystic. She provides an important example of how composers drew on the Bible during the Middle Ages, when the form known as “plainsong” predominated. It is called that because voices sing in unison, in contrast with later choral music that often involves singers creating harmony by singing different notes at the same time. In the process of examining Hildegard’s music, we learn a great deal about how she and others in her time understood, interpreted, and otherwise interacted with the Bible.

Since there were already standard ways of chanting biblical texts, it is unsurprising that she focused her work as a composer on creating not only new music but new words. Her song lyrics are her own compositions and, at the same time, abound in allusions to

the Bible.¹ As one example, we may consider a work such as “Ave Maria O Auctrix Vite,” or “Hail Mary, Authoress of Life.” The [lyrics](#) allude to the Hail Mary / Ave Maria, a prayer that has often been set to music and in turn is based on the angel’s greeting to Mary in the [Gospel of Luke \(Luke 1:28\)](#). They also allude to the promise in Genesis 3 that the offspring of Eve would bruise the head of the serpent, interpreted as predicting the birth of Jesus and the defeat of Satan thereby. In songs such as these, we encounter biblical words interwoven with the composer’s own and learn a great deal about how the Bible was understood in that time. Elsewhere in the book we have explored works that combine or draw on multiple biblical texts in a single work of music and the way music often reflects not only the Bible but also the way it has been interpreted. Hildegard provides a distinctive perspective on this because of something that sets her apart from the other composers and songwriters included in this book and would still make her stand out even if somehow we managed to include all the world’s composers from every time and place. It is rare if not unique to have from the same author an extensive output of music on biblical themes, lengthy books of homilies and commentaries that indicate in prose how that same individual interpreted the Bible, letters, an autobiographical work, and much more. Hildegard, however, has left us precisely that, which is all the more striking given the distance in time that separates her from our own era in which print and, more recently, digital means of literary expression have made it possible for us to have much more from a composer than just their music. The illustrated manuscripts of the sermons she delivered to the nuns in her monasteries offer a glimpse of how the arts and theology were connected in the life of those medieval monastic communities. In addition to her many remarkable accomplishments, Hildegard is remarkable simply because of how much we know

1. [In chapter 20, we focus on the subject of allusions.](#)

about her life when compared to other women, or indeed people in general, in the Middle Ages.²

Honey Meconi encapsulates just how distinctive Hildegard not only was but is:

Many know Hildegard today foremost or even exclusively as a composer, and her achievements in this area are indeed noteworthy: the most prolific composer of plainchant; one of the earliest—male or female—that we know by name; creator of the first musical “morality play” (and the only one for whom we have a named composer); and composer of seventy-seven songs, all but one set to her own idiosyncratic poetry in a distinctive and glorious musical style. But just as her music, all [plainchant](#), distinguishes her from the many other feisty and creative spiritual women of the twelfth century, so, too, do her nonmusical accomplishments separate her from virtually all other major composers (whether of the Middle Ages or later times), few of whom are known for anything but composition, and almost none of whom are of equal significance in another field. Yet during her lifetime and until very recently it was not Hildegard’s music that led to her fame; rather, it was her spirituality. Indeed, Hildegard’s was a holistic life, and her music can only be understood as one facet of a creativity that mirrored and was generated by her religious beliefs.³

Works like [O gloriosissimi lux vivens angeli](#) (O most glorious living light of the angels) and [O vos angeli](#) (O you angels), while not settings of biblical texts, show how the influence of the Bible as understood in Hildegard’s Roman Catholic tradition, her visions as a mystic, and her compositions are connected. The melody of the former she

2. Andrea Janelle Dickens, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 26.
3. Honey Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 1–2.

attributed to a vision of angels that she had, and what she has to say about angels reflects the way Pope Gregory the Great interpreted certain parables in the Gospel of Luke.⁴



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In addition to engaging with the Bible in her musical compositions and in her writings about the Bible, Hildegard also indicated (in response to an order from a superior that she and her community cease celebrating the chants of the Divine Offices) that she understood the prophetic Spirit whose voice we hear through the Bible to not merely permit but order that music and song be offered to God.⁵

[Have a listen to more of Hildegard's music](#), and perhaps [read a bit more about her fascinating life](#) while you do so! Try to at least take a glimpse at some of her impressive literary output. Works

4. On this, see Tova Leigh-Choate, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler, "Hearing the Heavenly Symphony: An Overview of Hildegard's Musical Oeuvre with Case Studies," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Debra Stoudt, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Kienzle (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2013), 176–77. Video of the recording by Sequentia released by deutsche harmonia mundi, on whose behalf it is licensed to YouTube by SME.
5. See the excerpt from a letter she sent to the prelate of Mainz around the year 1178, provided in Josiah Fisk, ed., *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 2–3.

like her *Solutions to Thirty-Eight Questions* illustrate just what a learned and insightful interpreter of the Bible she was.⁶

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6. On Hildegard's educational background and her acceptance and authority as a mystic, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52–54.

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24. Salamone Rossi

In this chapter you will

- be introduced to an important composer of the Renaissance era
- learn about the challenges a Jewish composer faced in Europe in that era
- consider what was involved in bringing Jewish scriptural and other texts together with the European musical language and system of notation

This chapter explores the pioneering influence Jewish composer Salamone Rossi had on both composition and the printing of Hebrew music. We [know far less about him](#) than we would like. Rossi lived during the period known as the Renaissance (roughly the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries). While there was indeed a great deal of artistic and other forms of activity that is of great interest during that time, the notion that prior to that European cultures stagnated and produced little of interest or significance is mistaken—at best a serious exaggeration of the situation, as our discussion of music from that era (and in particular the music and biblical interpretation of Hildegard of Bingen) hopefully makes clear. Jews in European kingdoms in Rossi's time faced a great deal of [discrimination](#).¹ This makes his status as a successful and influential

1. On this context, see Jane S. Gerber, [Cities of Splendour in the](#)

figure in the musical life of his time and place all the more noteworthy, and this is yet another reason to wish we knew more about his life than we do.

Rossi played a significant role in the Italian musical scene in the era of the [Renaissance](#), when there was a shift away from polyphonic music (music in which several voices sing separate lines) to music that had one solo voice plus an [accompaniment](#) that was notated using the bass or low notes (referred to in this context as *basso continuo*). This innovation involved not just different combinations of elements but experimentation with intervals (jumps between notes) that were not characteristic of earlier music, although in the context of his time, Rossi's approach was still largely conservative. Rossi also contributed to [synagogue music](#) and was involved in what represents the first printed book of music for a synagogue. Yet because [he composed in a contemporary European style](#), some of his Jewish contemporaries viewed his influence on Jewish music as an unacceptable departure from tradition.

Here is Joshua Jacobson commenting on Rossi's significance, followed by Rossi's setting of Psalm 137.²



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=55#oembed-1>

[Shaping of Sephardi History](#) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 124–70.

2. The Zamir Chorale of Boston is conducted by Joshua Jacobson in this performance shared by the conductor to his own YouTube channel. Recorded at the Sacred Bridges concert at Our Lady Help of Christians Parish in Newton, Massachusetts.

If you have listened to other music from this period, such as that of Thomas Tallis, you will hear similarities, including in music that would have been performed in churches rather than synagogues. The language sung in Rossi's setting is the original [Hebrew](#), but the *musical* language is one he shared with his European contemporaries.³ Rossi also composed various [other musical works](#) of the sorts popular in his time. His output was by no means limited to sacred music. In some instances (for example, Rossi's contemporary Thomas Weelkes) there is clear evidence of Rossi's influence on others' compositions.⁴

After a long period of relative neglect, Rossi has received renewed attention since the twentieth century. American composer [Lukas Foss wrote a suite dedicated to Rossi](#). With hindsight, we can see that Rossi played a part in the [shift between the musical eras of the Renaissance and the Baroque](#) (which we talk more about in chapter 25). You can [learn more about Rossi's music in the video and accompanying text on the Early Music Sources website](#). You can browse the book he published in digitized form courtesy of the [Internet Archive](#) as well as on the International Music Score Library Project ([IMSLP](#)). Many [recordings](#) of his works are available in addition to those included in this chapter.

3. See Judith I. Haug, "[Hebräischer Text: Italienische Musik: Sprachbehandlung in Salomone Rossis Psalmvertonungen \(1622/23\)](#)," *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft* 64, no. 2 (2007): 105–35, on how characteristics of the Hebrew language required Rossi to approach setting the text differently than he might have in if working in Latin or a European vernacular.
4. See Eric Lewin Altschuler and William Jansen, "[Thomas Weelkes's Text Authors: Men of Letters](#)," *Musical Times* 143, no. 1879 (2002): 23–24.

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25. Johann Sebastian Bach

In this chapter you will

- explore the religious background of one of the most famous composers of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach, and its relevance to understanding his music
- be introduced to the Baroque era of music
- begin to explore the musical genre of the “Passion” (focused on the suffering of Jesus) and its theological and historical background

J. S. Bach: The Composer, His Time, and His Faith

Creating music can be a way of expressing one's faith, and the setting of biblical (as well as other) texts to music can be a theological undertaking in a number of different respects. One's own theology and that of one's community will influence decisions about what texts to set and what musical accompaniment is appropriate. The act of setting the text to music may, in turn, lead to new theological insights. Viewed from the standpoint of a later time, these musical settings may provide important information about the history of religious thought and practice.

We can see all of the above in the work of Johann Sebastian

Bach, one of the most famous musicians of the [Baroque period](#). Most people know the term *baroque* as one that designates a specific period in history spanning most of the seventeenth century and part of the eighteenth century as well. What fewer know is that the term *baroque* has as its primary meaning a style of art, music, and architecture that was judged to be overly ornate. If anyone reading this associates music from the Baroque era with the peaceful and/or somber, they may be astonished to learn that the label *baroque* in fact characterizes it as “flashy” or “gaudy.” The ornateness may have become so familiar to our eyes and ears that we no longer perceive it as it was initially. Yet if we listen to music from the Renaissance era alongside music from the Baroque, we will, on the one hand, recognize some of the same musical forms (many associated with particular [dances](#)) while, on the other hand, the ornateness and complexity of the Baroque will likely stand out by comparison.

This is not the place for exploring in much detail the many key developments that converged in this era, whether the impact of the Protestant Reformation on European churches and their music or new ways of notating music in written form. However, by looking at the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach, we have an opportunity to learn some of the most crucial aspects of this era’s religious and musical life and the intersection of the two. It can help us get a sense of historical perspective when we consider that Bach’s life is [only somewhat closer](#) to the time of the Reformation than to the time in which you are reading this. Martin Luther was born a little over two hundred years before Bach’s birth. Bach’s death was 270 years prior to when these words are being written. Bach’s own historical moment was the era known as the [Enlightenment](#). There are debates about where Bach stood in relation to major streams of thought in that time, such as [Pietism](#)

[and rationalism](#).¹ One might approach the intersection of music and religion in the life of J. S. Bach in many ways. We could begin with the Reformation and seek to trace its influences. We could investigate what is known about church music in Lutheranism in this era, when [Bach worked as a church musician in a Lutheran context](#). We could jump straight to Bach's music itself and study the texts he set and the music he crafted for them. We could look at Bach's impact on the church and music subsequent to his time. All of these approaches are important, and how we begin often shapes our perception and influences our results.

One tangible object that belonged to the composer himself provides us with important insight into his perspective, his compositional practice, and his engagement with both the Bible and the thinking and issues of his era. I am referring to [Bach's own copy of Luther's translation of the Bible plus commentary, which includes Bach's annotations](#). This video from the [WFMT](#) radio station gives you a glimpse inside.



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An overview of Bach's life and work in [Christianity Today](#) says, "Nearly three-fourths of his 1,000 compositions were written for use in worship."² On this point we may compare and contrast

1. Victor Lederer, *Bach's St. Matthew Passion: A Closer Look* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 11-13.
2. "Johann Sebastian Bach: 'The Fifth Evangelist,'" *Christianity Today*, accessed September 14, 2022, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>

Bach with George Frideric Handel. They were exact contemporaries, and Handel is the focus of a separate chapter in this book. Bach wrote music for use in churches, while Handel wrote music for entertainment. Bach provides evidence that the Protestant Reformation was indeed understood as a reform rather than a radical break with earlier Christianity. The words he set to music adapt and paraphrase not only biblical text or Lutheran hymns but also earlier Latin sacred music. In Bach's religious music, as in other works influenced by [Pietism](#), we find far more frequent use of *Jesus* and *Savior* than we do in earlier music, which preferred *Christ* and *Lord*.³ Bach's cantata 77 is a setting of Luther's chorale about the Ten Commandments, which concludes with a distinctively Lutheran emphasis on the role of the commandments in making people aware of their sinfulness and the futility of human action and effort.⁴ Such things may perhaps be understood on their own, but their significance is certainly clearer in light of their historical and theological context. If we were to delve further into Bach's music, we would see both the influence of movements such as Pietism and differences between what Pietism characteristically emphasized and Bach's works. Alas, here we can barely scratch the surface of this subject.

Reflecting on the fact that Bach wrote his sacred works to be part of worship in churches should lead us to ponder how very different the world of music was in that era—and indeed throughout most of history. Church was one of the few places in European societies where the vast majority of people could expect to encounter music. There were no recordings. While many people

history/people/musiciansartistsandwriters/johann-sebastian-bach.html.

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 65.
4. Eric Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161–64.

undoubtedly sang and made music in a variety of ways in their homes and communities, to create music featuring large numbers of voices, an [organ](#), and/or numerous other instruments required organization, practice, a large venue, and much else. Even in a church context, this could be expensive to realize. The only other major venue for large-scale musical ensemble performances was in the context of theater or concert halls, which either charged admission or were funded by wealthy sponsors. And of course, we haven't even mentioned the question of compensation for those who composed the music that would be performed.

Passions

One of the types of sacred music that Bach is particularly associated with is known as the Passion. The Latin term *Passio*, from which we get the term *Passion*, focuses not on love (the modern sense of the English word) but on *suffering*. Even before Bach and others created extended musical works with this title, the “Passion play” was a popular element in medieval European cultures, in which the story of Jesus's suffering was acted out. Yet musical treatments of the Passion were not a common element prior to Bach. Bach's Passions came about thanks to the [funding provided in the will of a wealthy woman named Maria Rosina Koppy for works of this sort to be written and performed in Good Friday services in Leipzig](#). Good Friday is the Friday before Easter and is focused on commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus, hence the theme of Bach's compositions created for use on that specific day of the Christian calendar.

The [cross](#) is central in many ways to Christian thought and thus also Christian worship, and not only on this particular holy day. One cannot explore the musical treatment of the stories of Jesus's crucifixion in a meaningful way without close attention to the theological interpretation of Jesus's death as salvific. That is often something that the musical setting highlights, but even before

that, it is the reason why these stories are set to music and made a focus of religious devotion in the first place.

[Bach's Passions](#) are labeled "[according to John](#)" and "[according to Matthew](#)," reflecting the biblical text drawn on in the libretto. Neither is simply a setting of the biblical text without addition. Yet even with the additions and the further layer of interpretation provided by the librettos, the distinctive characteristics of those two Gospels come through to at least some extent. The specific Gospels after which the pieces are named are thus one important part of the explanation for the musical differences between the two works, even though at times Bach borrows from other Gospels than the one named in the title of the piece. The result is that we have two "Gospels," or at least "Passions," that are both as much "according to Bach" as anyone else and deserve to be considered in their own right in terms of their theological outlook and meaning. Just as Matthew's voice in his written Gospel is given due attention even though [he drew on Mark](#) (and indeed knowing that helps us understand Matthew's Gospel better), so too with Bach's Passions.

In chapter 26, we will look further into Bach's Passions as well as beyond them to other composers, including those who have explored the story through film scores that feature in crucifixion scenes in movies about the life and death of Jesus. For now, simply listen to these two [Passions](#) by J. S. Bach, listening for [differences](#) and paying attention to the text to the extent that you can (if the fact that it is in German is a hurdle, never fear, for many English translations are available). Reflect on what each conveys and how it does so. Perhaps read the text of each of these Gospels' Passion Narratives while listening to the respective musical works. Or better still, follow along in the [libretto](#) (with [English translation](#)) while listening to get a sense of the meaning that German listeners experience more directly.

In some musical works with words, the meaning of the text and conveying it clearly are secondary to the musical experience. In works like these, the text is just as important, and the music and text

work together to convey meaning. For those who can read music even a little, amazing resources are available to dig deeper into Bach's works and his own compositional process. [Manuscripts of the St. John](#) and [St. Matthew Passions](#) that were made under Bach's own direction (with at least some parts written by Bach himself) can be viewed online. Some of them, especially when [compared with one another](#), give us [insight into the extent to which Bach's works were not fixed once and for all but changed over time](#). Although trying to discern motives for the alterations involves some speculation, the effort to do so is helpful in thinking about the meaning of music of this sort. There are [YouTube videos that allow you to see such manuscripts while listening](#) and [others that provide commentary and explanation about what we learn from the manuscripts](#). Even a little of a video like this one can give you a sense of the complexity of the music Bach wrote, even if you cannot read the music.⁵



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On the other hand, today you're most likely to hear Bach's works, including his sacred works, in a concert hall performed by professional musicians. Much can be learned by not only listening to but watching such performances. However you decide to do so, listen to the works and reflect on what they communicate to you and how the setting (performance hall vs. church) may change that

5. Performance at the Jesuitenkirche-Universitätskirche in Vienna, Austria, conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Licensed to YouTube by WMG on behalf of Teldec.

experience and the meaning of the music to listeners. Here are a couple of performances from among the many available to choose from.⁶



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=56#oembed-4>

There are more depths to each than the brief treatment here, or a single listen, will do justice to. Hopefully this chapter provides a helpful starting point.

6. The first performance is by the Netherlands Bach Society, conducted by Jos van Veldhoven, and was recorded for the project All of Bach on April 16 and 19, 2014, at the Grote Kerk, Naarden, the Netherlands. The second performance is by the Bach Collegium Japan Chorus and Orchestra, conducted by Masaaki Suzuki, recorded on March 15, 2020, at the Kölner Philharmonie in Cologne, Germany, and shared by Bach Collegium Japan to their own YouTube channel.

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26. Passions: Bach and Beyond

In this chapter you will

- continue learning about how Bach interpreted the Bible in his Passions
- survey how other composers since Bach have explored the same New Testament stories
- consider in comparison with these the treatment of the story in film scores as well as rock operas

Continuing Our Exploration of Bach's Passions

The last chapter introduced [Bach's Passion according to St. John and Passion according to St. Matthew](#), including a chance to hear them. As you listened to these works, which of the things that you read about (either in the chapter or in the links with further information) were you able to hear and notice for yourself? Bach places a [musical "halo"](#) around the words of Jesus in the St. Matthew Passion by having strings double the melody. The absence of that "halo" when Jesus utters his cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" adds additional poignancy to that moment. The St. Matthew Passion also features a repetition of the [chorale](#) melody associated with the hymn known in English as "O Sacred Head Now

Wounded.” Each time it occurs, it is a half step lower. Few will detect this consciously with their ears, but if we are made aware of it, we get a sense that [this recurring melody functions almost like a “countdown” to the climactic event of the death of Jesus](#). This provides an opportunity to reflect on the fact that there are aspects of music that can be experienced by any listener and others that may require not just studying music in general but looking at the score and/or reading commentaries on the work.

This is true not only of a musical exploration of the Passion but of the story itself. Does the story about the suffering of Jesus make sense on its own if one does not know anything else about him prior to reading/hearing it? The same question may be asked about Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*, which begins in the Garden of Gethsemane, as the location is traditionally known. (Mark and Matthew refer to the place where Jesus went with his disciples after the Last Supper as Gethsemane, while John says it was a garden.) In any telling of the story of Jesus’s suffering and crucifixion, there is an assumption of awareness on the part of the hearer not only of the narrative and what precedes it but of Christian theology. Why in general would someone make music about an execution? It only makes sense when we recognize how story, history, theology, and other layers of interpretation are all woven together.

[Jeffrey Baxter asks](#), “Did you know that Bach’s brilliant halo-like effect of accompanying strings to frame all of the words of Jesus (sung by a bass) was inspired by a similar use, 100 years earlier, by Dresden composer Heinrich Schütz in his ‘Sieben letzte Worte’ [Seven Last Words], where a duo of violins frame all of Jesus’ words? Bach goes a step further by using a whole orchestra of strings, and then stops them cold at Jesus’ last words (in the Matthew gospel), ‘Mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?’ [My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?].”¹

1. Note that the words Jesus is said to have uttered come from the

[Tim Smith writes](#) of the libretto by Christian Friedrich Henrici, who wrote under the pen name Picander, “Picander’s role was to slow down the drama, providing points of repose where one could dwell on a single emotion. These musical events are called ‘arias’ which literally means ‘air.’ You might think of an aria as a moment to catch your breath and discern the deeper meaning. Its purpose is to personalize the story for individuals. Picander wanted to help us feel the underlying message very deeply. Of the twenty-eight arias in the St. Matthew Passion, all are in the first person singular (I, me) except for one.”² The choice of language reflects the Protestant emphasis on translation and intelligibility, and this also influenced these Passions and made them different from earlier works in Latin.

Other aspects of the original performance set it apart from any you’re likely to hear today. [Markus Rathey writes](#),

A listener in the early twenty-first century goes to a performance of the passion intending to listen to Bach’s music. The St. John Passion, because of its length, is normally the only piece on the program. In 1725 the St. John Passion was part of the Good Friday [vespers](#), and was embedded in a liturgy:

Hymn “Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund”

beginning of [Psalm 22](#). The Gospels of Mark and Matthew are thereby indicating that Jesus was reciting a Psalm in the midst of his suffering. You may wish to read that Psalm in its entirety and ponder whether awareness of the Psalm as a whole changes your impression of what those words mean on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels.

2. Tim Smith, “The Words of Bach’s Passion: Its Bible, Poetry, and Chorales,” accessed September 14, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190326210447/http://bach.nau.edu/matthew/Content/Calov.pdf>.

Bach, St. John Passion (part 1)

Hymn "Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend"

Sermon

Bach, St. John Passion (part 2)

Motet "Ecce, quomodo moritur justus" (Jacobus Gallus)

[Collect prayer](#)

Biblical verse "Die Strafe liegt auf ihm" (Isaiah 53:5)

Hymn "Nun danket alle Gott"

Taking into account that a seventeenth or eighteenth century sermon took about one hour, we can realistically assume that the entire vespers service lasted at least three-and-a-half hours. Bach's setting of the passion narrative would have occupied the most time, but each of its parts, about one hour in length, was balanced by a sermon of approximately the same length.

Not only was the temporal framework different, but the liturgy also contributed to a synthesis of meaning for the passion. The liturgy began with a hymn of the congregation, Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund ("As Jesus hung upon the cross"), a chorale based on the Seven Words of Christ on the cross. The hymn is already a summary of Christ's passion before the first chord of Bach's passion setting has sounded.³

There was thus, in a very real sense, an element of congregational participation in the event, irrespective of how one answers [the question of whether the congregation would have sung along with the chorale hymns](#) in Bach's Passions. The hymns and the sermon

3. Markus Rathey, ["Johann Sebastian Bach's 'St John Passion' from 1725: A Liturgical Interpretation," *Colloquium: Music, Worship, Arts* 4 \(2007\) pp.123-139.](#)

provided a context for Bach's work very different from what one experiences today in a concert hall (or in a [YouTube video](#)).

We will consider the genre of the [oratorio](#) (a musical drama that is sung but not acted out) in more detail in connection with the life and work of G. F. Handel, when we will also discuss why Handel's most famous work, *The Messiah*, although sometimes called an oratorio, doesn't actually fit that category. Oratorios were usually composed for the performance hall as art music, so while Handel was controversial for composing works on sacred themes for a secular venue, Bach moved in the [opposite direction](#), composing [oratorios](#) for use in church.⁴

One could dig into many other topics in connection with Bach's Passions and [other works](#), such as whether the anti-Semitism of his era and his church tradition find expression in the libretto and the music. The Gospels themselves came to be interpreted as blaming not only Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus but [the Jews as a people for all time](#). Given that the first Christians were themselves Jewish, it is hard to know how much they can be judged responsible for the way that the later predominantly Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) church interpreted them. Whatever one's view on that topic, that history of interpretation is a profoundly disturbing one. The [Passion plays](#) that began to be performed in the middle ages were an influence on musical Passions, and those plays certainly fostered anti-Jewish sentiment and actions. As [Barbara Bradley Hagerty explains on National Public Radio](#), "Civil authorities were concerned about bloodshed in the wake of these plays. According to James Shapiro, in 1338 the authorities in Freiburg, Germany, prohibited churches from performing anti-Jewish scenes. In 1469, the Frankfurt government ordered special measures to protect Jews during the performances. And in 1539, the authorities in Rome

4. Victor Lederer, *Bach's St. Matthew Passion: A Closer Look* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 11.

banned Passion plays after years of violence.”⁵ Whether one is considering Bach’s Passions or the Gospels themselves, it is appropriate to ask how they may need to be viewed and handled differently than they were in the past in an effort to acknowledge the harm caused in the past and prevent it from being perpetuated in the present.

Bach, like many other composers, made revisions to his own works, providing an opportunity for you to get a glimpse of the creative process the composer was engaged in not just before a work’s premiere but still thereafter. This raises the question of which version of a work should be performed and considered definitive. Composers sometimes not only made changes but undid them, eventually preferring their earlier choices, making it difficult to simply assume that the last version the composer published or had performed is definitive. Having had a chance to reflect on some of the details of Bach’s creations, before proceeding to other musical explorations of the story of Jesus’s crucifixion, think about some of the choices composers have to make, using the questions below to help you do so. We will add some additional questions to these later in the chapter when we turn our attention to film scores’ treatments of the story.

Questions That Confront Composers

5. NPR, “Profile: History of Passion Plays and Why Jews Are Concerned about Renewed Anti-Semitism Resulting from Mel Gibson’s Film ‘The Passion of the Christ,’” Weekend Edition Sunday, February 22, 2003.

- Where do you start telling the story? Where do you end?
- What should crucifixion sound like musically? What does crucifixion look like, and how does music contribute to listeners conjuring up that mental image?
- How does theological interpretation of the story affect musical choices? What feelings should music on this theme evoke?
- What does the death of Jesus mean? What is its significance, and how do you know that? What, if anything, does it accomplish and how? How is the significance of the event conveyed through text, music, and the combination of the two?
- Do you include in your musical work only biblical material or other text as well?

Passions beyond Bach

Let us turn now to other works in this same genre. Bach wasn't the first, nor was he the last, to compose a Passion. Some works are closely related but bear a [different title](#). Some add the story of the resurrection alongside the account of the crucifixion. These differences may be not only musically but theologically significant.

A work that is clearly not intended for liturgical use is Krzysztof Penderecki's "St. Luke Passion." It was nonetheless composed to be performed in church at least in the first instance, as it was [commissioned to commemorate the seven hundredth anniversary of Münster Cathedral](#). Penderecki, like that church, was

[Roman Catholic](#), and the fact that he composed this work in [Communist Poland](#) should not be missed, as Communist countries have historically imposed restrictions on the public expression and practice of religion. We will encounter other composers in Eastern Europe during that era who navigated the challenges of whether and how to express their own religious perspectives in their music. For Penderecki, that the composition of religious music represented a form of [rebellion against Communism](#) was more important than any connection with his own personal faith and perspective. Ironically, even as his choice of texts and themes was perceived as rebellious, his modern musical style was criticized by some as merely jumping on the bandwagon of modern [atonality](#) (about which you will learn more in chapter 30 on Arnold Schoenberg). Despite the work's [challenging musical language and style](#), many listeners nonetheless find they can appreciate it and it connects with them emotionally and/or spiritually.⁶



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-1>

Arvo Pärt is the most performed living composer at the time of the writing of this book. He has created a number of works that set or draw on biblical texts, among which is his *Passio* (St. John Passion).⁷ This work needs to be included here if for no other

6. Performance by the Warsaw Philharmonic licensed to YouTube by WMG.

7. [Chapter 33 is devoted to Pärt](#). On his *Passio*, see Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 122–39.

reason than it raises an interesting question: What vocal range do you assume that Jesus should sing in? There are tendencies in the choice of vocal ranges both for specific religious figures and for lead roles in general. Most female vocalists are categorized as soprano (singing the highest notes), mezzo-soprano, and alto. Male voices range from tenor (singing the highest notes) to baritone and bass. Most often in operas and oratorios, the lead male character is a tenor, and Jesus is not normally an exception. With this in mind, listen to at least some of [Pärt's setting](#).⁸



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-2>

What do you think of his decision to have Jesus be a [bass](#)? The relatively sparse instrumentation compared with other settings of the Passion story? The way the organ accompanies his words, perhaps not unlike Bach's use of strings?

As another relatively recent example from this genre, here is Italian composer [Sergio Rendine's](#) work that debuted in 2000, *Passio e Ressurrectio Domini Nostri Jesus Christi*.⁹



8. This recording by the Mogens Dahl Kammerkor is shared on YouTube by the [Mogens Dahl Koncertsal](#).

9. Soloists Chorus and Orchestra of the Marrucino Theatre at Chieti, here conducted by Marzio Conti. Licensed to YouTube by Naxos.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-3>

Latvian composer [Ēriks Ešenvalds's Passion and Resurrection](#) continues beyond the crucifixion to include the events of Easter. Its open ending, with the voice of Jesus addressing Mary Magdalene and her response of recognition, is profound and powerful (read the story in [John 20:11-18](#) if you aren't familiar with it). For the apostle Paul in the New Testament, it was the death and resurrection of Jesus that together accomplished salvation, not his death alone (see, in particular, [1 Corinthians 15:17](#)). Whether or not Ešenvalds, a Baptist, had Paul's emphasis in mind, his work and others like it raise a question about the genre of the musical Passion: Is it enough for the story of the crucifixion alone to be set to music and serve as the focus of piety and devotion, or is it incomplete if it fails to continue to Easter and the resurrection?

Even when unaccompanied by music, texts from the Bible may connect with an individual reader's own personal experience in surprising and powerful ways. When set to music, this may make the emotional impact greater still. Scottish composer James MacMillan shares an example of this from his own experience:

Composers talk about their own music in dispassionate terms. They have to, because they can't really predict its impact on listeners. Recently in Holland there was a performance of my St Luke Passion, which includes a passage in which Christ addresses the women of Jerusalem and talks about barrenness; and at that point in the piece I noticed a couple in the audience gripping each other very, very strongly, as if something had really touched them. Perhaps they couldn't have children themselves. I'd never

thought about that before, and it reminded me that there are things in my work that have implications for people because of their own circumstances. I think a lot of composers get private approaches, either face to face or through correspondence, from people who've found a work particularly affecting.¹⁰

MacMillan is the composer not only of the [St. Luke Passion](#) mentioned in the quote but also of [St. John Passion](#) and [Seven Last Words from the Cross](#). As we saw in the case of Bach, MacMillan also provides an opportunity to explore how a composer who is [a person of faith](#) acts as a biblical interpreter, setting different biblical material on the same theme, the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. Considering that more than one composer explores the same or related texts and themes, comparing their choices allows one to better understand the compositional process as well as trace the ongoing influence of Bach's compositions on those who have followed him.

Jesus's Cinematic Sufferings

As we turn our attention to film scores, we should ask how movies use words, images, and music to convey a story, including any

10. Andrew Palmer, *Encounters with British Composers* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), 293. MacMillan discusses how he has been drawn to the Passion of Christ as a theme in James MacMillan, "God, Theology, and Music," in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 40–42. See also MacMillan's discussion in the same work of how, in his words, "music seems to get into the crevices of the human-divine experience" (p. 36).

theological meaning. It can be useful to ask general questions before turning to specific ones. Think about what you would do if you were making a Bible epic about the life of Jesus and were providing direction to the film score composer about what you wanted during the crucifixion sequence.

Questions to Ponder

- What music would seem appropriate to the depiction on-screen of a crucifixion?
- How, if at all, should Jesus's crucifixion sound different from that of others executed by the Romans in the same way?
- What musical mood is appropriate to the crucifixion of Jesus? Is this a moment for sorrow and lamentation? Should those who approach the event through the lens of Christian theology rejoice at salvation accomplished through Jesus's death, understood as an atoning sacrifice? Should the emotions one feels be mixed, and if so, how might a filmmaker and a film score composer evoke those mixed emotions?
- How does one convey narrative drama in a well-known story, and what part does music play in that?
- How does one convey theology in music that accompanies acting and visible scenery?
- What instruments should be used? Modern orchestral ones associated with film scores, Middle Eastern ones reflecting the time and place of events, or some combination of the two?

- When, if at all, should there be silence? Where are there crescendos? What is happening on-screen at those moments?
- How long does the crucifixion scene take?

Here are some examples that you should watch as well as listen to, since they are films and not only music. First, here is part of the crucifixion scene from the 1965 film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.¹¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-4>

Here is the treatment in the movie *King of Kings* from 1961.¹²



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11. *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, directed by George Stevens. Copyright MGM 1965. Clip licensed by the Movieclips YouTube channel.
12. Shared on the Memória Cinematográfica YouTube channel. [Buy or rent the complete movie on YouTube here.](#)



from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-5>

The more recent movie *The Passion of the Christ* is entirely devoted to the suffering and death of Jesus. Nevertheless, a few minutes provide a good basis for comparison with the other movies mentioned that start the story of Jesus much earlier than Gethsemane. Here are two clips from the movie that illustrate some of the [interesting filmmaking choices](#) (and, if you listen closely, how music and other sounds are used).¹³



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One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-7>

13. Music licensed to YouTube by SME. Shared on the kinobscura YouTube channel. [Buy or rent the complete movie on YouTube here.](#)

The music is by composer [John Debney](#). The lyrics from the *Passion of the Christ* soundtrack can be found online in places, having originally been shared on [lyricist Lisbeth Scott's website](#). The use of Aramaic is noteworthy but not unexpected given the movie's use of Latin and Aramaic for the dialogue rather than English or any other modern language. The very inclusion of words sets this soundtrack apart from many others. Unlike the words of Bach's Passions, however, these are not included with the expectation that hearers will understand them, because unlike the film's dialogue, the lyrics that are sung are not accompanied by on-screen subtitles.

There is [an interview with the composer, Peter Gabriel](#) (better known for his rock music), about the score he composed for the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the soundtrack for which was released as an album titled [Passion](#). *Jesus Christ Superstar* is also a depiction that many will be familiar with. Its [crucifixion scene](#) is set within the context of a musical-theatrical reinterpretation of the story of Jesus told from Judas's perspective, all of which sets it apart both from the oratorios and from the movie soundtracks we have considered thus far. This rock opera (it isn't a musical, since all parts are sung and none of them is spoken) has been given multiple cinematic and onstage renditions that have [interesting differences](#) among them as well.¹⁴



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=57#oembed-8>

14. The 1973 movie by Universal Pictures is the first of many film versions of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Before leaving this topic, reflect once again on the fact that [composers](#) like Johann Sebastian Bach deserve to be considered [theologians](#) and/or biblical interpreters. How do they perform the tasks associated with these roles differently because they use music in the process? Do filmmakers and film score composers engage in theology and/or biblical interpretation differently than composers of art music? Keep in mind that even without a visual depiction or musical accompaniment, information from beyond the text always impacts our understanding of it. When you imagine the crucifixion scene in your mind as you read about it, you will likely fail to notice that the shape of the cross is not specified. The tradition about this may be correct, but the New Testament Gospels do not specify its shape. Not only filmmakers and composers but you as a reader are influenced by sources outside the text, including artwork that both reflects and in turn influences the history of interpretation of the text.

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27. The Bible as Musical, Oratorio, and Opera

In this chapter you will

- begin learning about one of Johann Sebastian Bach's famous contemporaries, George Frideric Handel
- consider their very different careers as composers
- learn what an oratorio is and why some of Handel's were controversial in their day
- situate Handel's oratorios within the context of more recent works that may be more familiar to you

Introduction: Musical Entertainment Based on the Bible

[George Frideric Handel lived at the same time as J. S. Bach. They were both born in the same year, 1685.](#) Yet their trajectories, despite both pursuing careers in music, took them in significantly different directions, even though both interacted with the Bible extensively in their compositions. Bach was a church musician from a musical family. [Handel](#) was an [entrepreneur](#) who composed for performance in theaters and other secular venues.

Handel composed many different kinds of works, but he is especially famous for his oratorios, and those works also connect most directly with our interest in this book in the intersection of the Bible and music. An oratorio is essentially an opera without the acting. Different individuals nonetheless depict different roles. Ben Finane writes, “The roots of oratorio...stretch back to the settings of sacred texts in the Middle Ages as well as Medieval mystery plays, whose purpose was to provide education in key points of the Bible to a population that was largely illiterate or lacked access to the Good Book. Biblical texts were set to music and men were taught to sing them—chiefly to learn their verses.”¹ Oratorios were not always on sacred themes, of course, and those who are interested might wish to investigate what, if anything, apart from the words themselves, distinguishes religious oratorios from others.² [Handel wrote quite a number both sacred and secular](#), and it is the biblical ones that will be our focus here, once we provide a bit more historical context.

Historically, in many churches, the visual arts had played an important role in conveying stories from the Bible to those who could not read them. Many Eastern Orthodox churches are literally covered with artwork in their interior, with [icons](#) focused on biblical stories and people as well as those from later in church history. Catholic churches will typically include statues, and many also include significant amounts of visual artistry of other types. Catholic churches and some Protestant ones may have stained glass windows. Some Protestant churches will have none of those things. The [history](#) behind these differences is not something we can explore here. It does, however, indicate how [Protestantism](#) may

1. Ben Finane, [Handel's Messiah and His English Oratorios: A Closer Look](#) (New York: Continuum, 2009), 26.
2. The first secular oratorio we know of is Claudio Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* from 1624.

have created a space and a desire or need for musical artistry to replace the visual that [certain theological stances rejected](#).

Cultures that valued biblical stories also created a space for performances aimed primarily at entertainment. If you watch the story of Jesus on television or in the cinema, however much it may perhaps connect with a personal faith that you have, the very nature of the venue and medium makes the experience and meaning different from what would be expected in a church or other religious setting. When religion and entertainment coincide, the result is not always welcomed by either the religious or consumers. You have probably encountered some examples in the news at some point of people objecting to a movie, song, or something else because of religion. They may complain that it promotes religion or that it denigrates it. These kinds of negative reactions to religion and entertainment joining forces have a long history.

Rock Operas and Musicals

You probably will not be surprised that controversy surrounded *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The rock opera by Andrew Lloyd Webber (discussed briefly in the preceding chapter) is known to many from the 1970s and found a new following more recently with [the television version starring John Legend as Jesus](#). Its take on the story of Jesus is offered through the lens of Judas Iscariot (the disciple said to have betrayed Jesus) and so is controversial because of its story even apart from anything one might say about things like musical choices. Other modern depictions for the purpose of entertainment, such as the animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*, are less controversial in that sense. But they still raise questions about the use of the Bible for entertainment, the appropriateness of making money by telling stories from the Bible, and so on. Here is a

clip from the movie *The Prince of Egypt* for those who may not have seen it.³



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=58#oembed-1>

Controversies about sacred stories serving as mere entertainment are nothing new. Centuries ago, Handel faced objections from those who considered it inappropriate to have the words of Scripture performed on a secular stage. When studying music from the past, it can be helpful to think about the closest modern equivalents in order to better appreciate the role that music played in its own time and how music from our own era performs similar or different roles.

More on Handel's Oratorios

Handel created quite a number of oratorios that retell biblical stories. These include the stories of [Jephthah](#), [Deborah](#), Samson, [Solomon](#), and [Athalia](#), as well as those of Susanna and Judas Maccabeus, which are based on texts from the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books (i.e., those not found in most Protestant Bibles). The choice of attire and other aspects when these are performed today can create new layers of meaning, as for instance

3. Licensed by Universal to the Movieclips YouTube channel.

in this performance of [Jephtha](#), which is based on a story in [Judges 11](#).⁴



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=58#oembed-2>

In the present day, it is not uncommon for [an oratorio to be performed in a manner more like an opera](#) and conversely for an opera to be performed as a concert without the theatrical element. If you read the [libretto of Jephthah](#), which Handel set to music, you will see the great lengths to which it goes to make some kind of theological sense of this disturbing story of child sacrifice. You may wish to compare it with [the concert aria “Jephthah’s Daughter”](#) by American composer [Amy Beach](#), which sets a French poem by C. L. Mollevant. That work focuses more on the tragedy of the situation as viewed from the daughter’s perspective.⁵ The story of Jephthah is also given musical treatment by Giacomo Meyerbeer (*Jephtas Gelübde*), [Giacomo Carissimi](#) (*Jephte*), and [Aharon Harlap](#) ([Bat Yiftach](#)).⁶ There is also a completely instrumental exploration of

4. Ivor Bolton conducts the Freiburger Barockorchester. Soloists are Topi Lehtipuu, Carolyn Sampson, Ann Hallenberg, and Andrew Foster-Williams.
5. There are many other musical treatments of the story of Jephthah’s daughter, including those by Michel de Monteclair, Luis Cepeda, Ruperto Chapí, Elma Ehrich Levinger, Lucien Haudebert, and Lazare Saminsky.
6. Harlap, like many of the composers mentioned in this book and here in this chapter, has explored many more biblical stories than

the story by Ernst Toch, which we discuss briefly in chapter 21 on biblical music without words.

Handel's musical retellings of stories such as those of [Judas Maccabeus](#) and [Susanna](#), considered alongside the ones that are about stories found in Protestant Bibles, raise the question of whether audiences may respond to the same work differently depending on whether they view it as "biblical" or not. Either way, most oratorios use libretti that are not exclusively composed of biblical text and thus at the very least expand on and supplement the Bible.⁷ This is all the more true when the story is told not just set to music but with songs placed on the lips of characters. Anyone who has seen a musical knows that it is not simply the same thing as telling a story. A movie that is not a musical will still be full of music. The fact that characters sing makes a difference. What happens to a biblical story when it is given that sort of treatment? One might perhaps place most oratorios under the heading of "biblical Apocrypha" just like the many ancient texts we have that expand on biblical narratives.

The [libretto for Handel's *Israel in Egypt*](#), on the other hand, is drawn almost entirely from the biblical text, unlike many of the others. You may find it interesting to compare it with the more dramatized explorations of biblical stories by Handel on the one hand and the modern exploration of the same story in *The Prince of Egypt* on the other. What if anything is different other than the style, reflecting differences between the musical languages of the eighteenth century and today? Have a listen.⁸

we can mention here. The [composer's website](#) has much more that is worth exploring.

7. There are many oratorios and other works based on stories in the Apocrypha, such as [Vivaldi's *Juditha Triumphans*](#).
8. The SCM Chamber Choir and SCM Early Music Ensemble, conducted by Neil McEwan, perform G. F. Handel's *Israel in Egypt*



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=58#oembed-3>

It is hard for modern listeners to imagine that [a work such as this](#) could have been [controversial and met with opposition from religious people in England](#). For many, bringing sacred Scripture into the secular venue of the concert hall was strictly taboo.

Handel reused and incorporated some existing music into this new work. Of course, Bach did the same thing, most famously with “O Sacred Head.” That was church music being used in other church music, however. The reuse of music, both one’s own and that of others, is nothing new, nor has it ceased. Alfred Newman incorporated music by Handel and also Verdi at key moments in his score for *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, from which we shared a video clip in chapter 26 about Passions. In all sorts of ways, music sometimes makes connections between different musical works as well as with life and experiences outside the story being told.

The next chapter will discuss Handel’s most famous work, *the Messiah*. For now, listen to it. It is a long work, not always performed in its entirety, and offers an interesting combination of texts from all over the Bible. The very famous sections that just about every reader will recognize may take on a different meaning when heard in the context of the whole, just as these texts may take on new meanings when arranged in this manner.⁹

on October 14, 2016, at Verbrugghen Hall. Shared on YouTube by the University of Sydney.

9. Live performance at the Sydney Opera House by the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs and Christmas Choir and Sydney Philharmonia



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=58#oembed-4>

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28. Handel's *Messiah*

In the previous chapter you were introduced to the life and music of G. F. Handel and the way he and others have drawn on the Bible to provide entertainment. In this chapter you will

- explore Handel's most famous work, *The Messiah*, in detail
- learn why Handel's most famous oratorio is not in fact an oratorio
- compare the most famous part of *The Messiah* with another work by Handel that you may remember from television
- learn about the impact of *The Messiah* on one of the performers and some of Handel's contemporaries

Handel's Magnum Opus: *The Messiah*

For many people, if they know the musical term *oratorio*, it is because of [George Frideric Handel's most famous work](#), *The Messiah*. Ironically, however, while Handel composed a great many works that fall into the category of “biblical oratorio,” *The Messiah* is not one of them, technically speaking. If an oratorio may be defined as an opera without the costumes and acting, *The Messiah* does not have characters in the way operas and oratorios normally

would. Listen to the entire thing if you did not do so in the previous chapter.¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=59#oembed-1>

The [words](#) of the [libretto by Charles Jennens](#) are all taken from [biblical texts](#). They are not always taken directly from the King James Version (KJV) or the [Book of Common Prayer](#) (although most of them are). Jennens seems to have drawn on [Henry Hammond's paraphrase and annotations](#) on the books of the Bible,² which included criticism of the KJV.

As we said, *Messiah* is not, strictly speaking, an oratorio as typically defined in that era, since there is no drama. Oratorio meant something that was much the same as opera, without the acting but with different individuals nonetheless voicing different roles. Some appreciated the difference in the case of *Messiah*. Dr. Edward Synge, bishop of Elphin, commented that the lack of dialogue was a plus.³

The text on its own may not, at first glance, seem like the sort of thing that might inspire music, much less memorable, great music. Read it on its own and you will see what I mean. Any

1. Martin Pearlman conducts Boston Baroque. Licensed to YouTube by UMG.
2. The full title is *Deuterai phrontides, or, A review of the paraphrase & annotations on all the books of the New Testament with some additions & alterations*.
3. See Donald Burrows, *Handel, Messiah* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

biblical text can be set to music, of course, and there are a great many different instances of texts being brought together and set to music. Is there anything special about this particular group of texts, combined in this particular way, that might account for the work's popularity?

A [textual study of the libretto by Martin Dicke](#) notes, "His primary source was the King James Version of the Bible. For all but one of the Psalm texts, however, he used the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Altogether, the libretto is taken from 81 Bible verses that come from 14 different books of the Bible. Of these books, Isaiah is quoted the most frequently (21 verses) followed by the Book of Psalms (15 verses) and 1 Corinthians (10 verses). It is interesting and significant to note that all of the passages from 1 Corinthians come from 1 Corinthians 15."⁴ For those not familiar with it, chapter 15 of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth focuses on resurrection—both the resurrection of Jesus and resurrection as the form of afterlife for all. Many of the texts incorporated into the libretto are well known among the biblically literate—they are not, for the most part, obscure.

Musically, hints of elements that are to come later are woven in very early. For instance, specific harmonic progressions and cadences in "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" will be fleshed out more fully in the "Hallelujah" chorus. The latter is about the revelation of the glory of the Lord in its fullest eschatological (end of time/history) sense, as the kingdoms of the world become the kingdom of God and his Christ forever more. If one listens to Handel's coronation anthem "Zadok the Priest," composed for the 1727 coronation of King George II of England, one hears similarities with the famous "Hallelujah Chorus." That work is a setting of a biblical text and may be known to some today from [its appearance in the television show The Crown in the scene of Elizabeth's](#)

4. There are, in fact, seventeen quotations from the Psalms if one includes New Testament quotations from that book.

[coronation](#). It is interesting to think about whether the musical and lyrical similarity between the two works suggests that the famous “Hallelujah Chorus” ought to be thought of as a coronation anthem for Jesus.⁵ The scene from Revelation that is depicted (see Revelation [11:15](#))—and indeed, in a sense, the book as a whole—could be interpreted in that way. Listen from around 2:43 in this recording of the work, and see if the similarity strikes you in the same way.⁶



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We see from these few examples, among many others that could be provided, that Handel was theologically as well as musically astute, as he would need to be in order to find in Jennens’s libretto not a mere catena of texts but a combination that has profound depth and significance. And this helps us recognize the key elements in the reception of the Bible in *Messiah*. The biblical text is interpreted whenever one makes omissions or takes verses and passages from their original context and places them side by side.⁷

5. Calvin R. Stapert, [Handel’s Messiah: Comfort for God’s People](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 135.
6. Performed by the Academy of Ancient Music and the Choir of the Academy of Ancient Music, conducted by Richard Egarr. Recorded live at Symphony Hall in Birmingham. Shared on YouTube by the Academy of Ancient Music.
7. For example, you may know what Paul had in view when [he wrote to the Philippians, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”](#) but if you wear it on a T-shirt, you are probably

Setting them to music then interprets them again. (And when cuts are made to *Messiah*, the meaning changes once more.) The combination of ancient Israelite prophecy, Gospel narrative, and New Testament prophecy that we encounter in *Messiah* creates new meanings and interpretations of the biblical text even apart from the music. A great example of the change of meaning when texts are removed from their original context and juxtaposed can be found in Part II of *Messiah*, “Lift Up Your Heads,” which sets [Psalm 24](#) in the context of Jesus’s [descent into hell](#) and ascension into heaven so that the gates become those of hell or those of heaven, but in either case, they are no longer those of the earthly city of Jerusalem.

The music begins softly and builds from there—although the total ensemble is sparser than in other oratorios Handel wrote. The work includes musical “word painting” that anyone can appreciate—listen to the leaps on the word “exalted,” the jagged up and down on “crooked,” and so on.⁸ Yet the music is also rich from the perspective of performers. Were this not so, the piece would not have become such a global phenomenon. Music that people enjoy listening to but no one relishes performing is not going to be performed and recorded as frequently as *Messiah* has been. And so one can analyze the work musically—noting, for instance, that in Part I of *Messiah*, the first of each group of three sections tends to be in a key that is subsequently revealed to be the dominant key of the next, musically depicting the sense of expectation that the words also convey.

Thus, while some take the easy route of attributing this masterpiece (as any other) to “inspiration,” it is a work that only someone with exceptional musical and theological ability could

already applying it beyond Paul’s intended scope. Even if not, some who see your T-shirt will not know the original context and are likely to misunderstand.

8. This is known as “madrigalism,” on which see further Stapert, [Handel’s Messiah](#), 83.

produce.⁹ Handel made improvements to the music subsequent to the first performance (as well as other adjustments for performances in specific locations where the musicians and vocalists available differed).¹⁰ Noting these points is not to remove the element of inspiration but to emphasize that great words, great music, and the greater combination of the two do not come to those who lack the training to channel the ideas. Moreover, the fact that great writers and composers did not simply have ideas come to them fully formed in a final and perfect version but created drafts that they subsequently revised and improved is crucial knowledge for would-be writers and composers in our time.

It is truly the interplay of the words and music that makes *Messiah* so powerful, so memorable, so meaningful, and so popular. The words on their own might or might not be deemed an interesting selection of biblical texts. The music on its own would undoubtedly be enjoyable if you like music from this era. When the two are combined, however, something emerges that is more than the sum of their parts. Try simply reading the libretto or [listening to the music of *Messiah* without the words](#) and you'll see what I mean. This is not to suggest that the music on its own does not have merit, much less to suggest something of that sort about the lyrics! The point is that the combination becomes something greater—in this case, something *much* greater—than either is on its own.

Let me end this brief consideration of the interplay of words and music in *Messiah* by noting Jennens's own reaction to the work, which Handel composed in only three weeks after receiving the libretto. In a January 1743 letter to Edward Holdsworth, Jennens

9. On this, see, for example, Michael Steinberg, *Choral Masterworks: A Listener's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148–50; and Stapert, *Handel's Messiah*, 42.
10. Revisions were also made in later times for performances—[for instance, by none other than Mozart](#)! See Steinberg, *Choral Masterworks*, 150–54.

wrote, “His Messiah has disappointed me, being set in great haste, tho’ he said he would be a year about it, & make it the best of all his compositions. I shall put no more sacred words into his hands to be thus abus’d.” Jennens’s impression of the piece improved once he heard it, but for years to follow, he would complain that the piece could have been better still had Handel made the improvements Jennens suggested to him.

Context of *The Messiah*

The historical context in which *Messiah* was composed was an era of increasing secularism, in which the use of sacred words for entertainment was controversial. David Greene writes, “It is a piece all of whose texts are drawn directly from the Bible, yet it is written for the concert hall, and uses a musical style that had been developed for the opera house, not the church.”¹¹ It would be too simple, however, to say only that *Messiah* exemplifies the outcome of a secularizing impulse. For it also shows another process at work, a process that is the reverse of secularization. It transforms the secular format and style, and they become the bearer of renewed and refreshed theological reflection. This process characterized Handel’s other oratorios, which—like seventeenth- and eighteenth-century oratorios in general—show the sacred attempting to reach

11. David B. Greene, *The Theology of Handel’s “Messiah,” Beethoven’s “Credo,” and Verdi’s “Dies Irae”: How Listening to Sung Theology Leads to the Contemplation of God* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2012), 14. See also p. 18, where he writes, “The harmonically generated relations among the texts give each text a particular force and nuance. In short, musical relations supplement or replace the role of grammar in relating the words to one another.”

into the profane and resanctify it, turning what had become profane into an aspect of the sacred. Indeed, the explicit strategy of those who commissioned the early Italian oratorios was to use a style that would reach out to people who were at risk of becoming indifferent to the life of the church and quicken their spirituality. Bach's Passions are only works of art by accident, as it were, whereas Handel's *Messiah* is art first and edification second. In an era that also witnessed the spread of [Deism](#) (the belief that God created the world to run according to natural laws so that divine interventions and miracles are unnecessary and do not occur), the question of how *Messiah* related to that is worth asking. Its outlook is orthodox, not Deistic—it emphasizes the activity of God in history and the person and work of Jesus in fairly traditional terms.

The [first performance took place in Dublin as a benefit concert](#) to raise money for two hospitals as well as prisoners in jails. Clergy objected to the work's use of Scripture for entertainment purposes when the work was then performed in London. But interestingly enough, when it was offered for a benefit concert there, that marked a turning point in the work's reception. And so it is important to reflect on the fact that just as words and music must be considered together, so too must both be in relation to their historical setting and their economic implications.

As is typical in Christian theology (in that time as often in our own), there is little focus on Jesus's public activity and teaching, with just a hint of miracle ("Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened" [[Isaiah 35:5](#)]). Instead, Jesus's fulfilment of prophecy, birth, suffering, and death takes center stage, with the most focus on his suffering and death.¹²

12. There has been extensive discussion in recent years about whether *Messiah* is anti-Jewish. It is interesting that the work can be construed both as reflecting and as challenging points of view that prevailed in its time. See Michael Marissen, *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); the

Reception of *The Messiah*

By One of Its Earliest Performers

The alto Susannah Cibber had been involved in a messy divorce for which she was widely criticized and, as a result, had moved from England to Dublin in Ireland in the early 1740s. [Denis Stevens writes](#), “In the Dublin performance, it was reputedly Mrs. Cibber’s deeply emotional and theatrical performance of ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’ that brought Rev. Dr. Patrick Delaney to his feet with ‘Woman, for this be all thy sins forgiven!’ If she had redistributed the words, lessening the stress on ‘my’ and strengthening the key-word ‘Redeemer,’ Delaney might have said nothing at all. English may not have been Handel’s native language, but he knew how to set it with an assurance only bettered by Purcell.”¹³ (Henry Purcell was one of Britain’s leading composers in the Baroque era.)

By Preachers

John Newton preached on the texts of Handel’s oratorio in the

response to an earlier version of one of Marissen’s chapters by John H. Roberts, “False Messiah,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (2010): 45–97; and Benjamin Ivry’s article “Is Handel’s ‘Messiah’ an Anti-Semitic Screed?,” *Forward*, April 12, 2014, <https://forward.com/news/196156/is-handel-s-messiah-an-anti-semitic-screed/>.

13. Denis Stevens, “Messiah: An Oratorio Written by George Frideric Handel,” Baroque Music, accessed September 12, 2022, <http://www.baroquemusic.org/HandelMessiah.html>.

Parish Church of St. Mary Woolnoth in London from 1784 to 1785 (published in 1786). This was not because he was a fan. He said/wrote, “It is probable that those of my hearers who admire this oratorio, and are often present when it is performed, may think me harsh and singular in my opinion that of all our musical compositions this is the most improper for a public entertainment. But while it continues to be equally acceptable, whether performed in a church or in the theatre, and while the greater part of the performers and of the audience, are the same at both places, I can rate it no higher than as one of the many fashionable amusements which mark the character of this age of dissipation. I am afraid it is no better than a profanation of the name and truths of God, a crucifying the Son of God afresh. You may judge for yourselves.”¹⁴

Yet from our time, we can safely say that some people know these texts from the Bible solely as a result of Handel’s *Messiah*—and no one knows them today directly as a result of Newton’s preaching. On the initial objections to Handel’s depiction of this sacred oratorio in a secular setting, Ben Finane writes, “*Messiah* did not fare as well, owing to outcry over the singing of Scripture in the theatre rather than the church; this panicked Handel to the extent that, without changing its title, he advertised *Messiah* in vague terms as ‘A New Sacred Oratorio.’”¹⁵ It will strike many today as odd that oratorios on

14. John Newton, *Messiah. Fifty Expository Discourses, on the Series of Scriptural Passages, Which Form the Subject of the Celebrated Oratorio of Handel* (London: Printed for the author and sold by J. Buckland and J. Johnson, 1786), <https://www.loc.gov/item/10000700/>; John Newton, “Sermon L. The Universal Chorus,” in *Messiah*, vol. 2, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed September 30, 2022, <https://ccel.org/ccel/newton/messiah2/messiah2.xxvi.html>.
15. Ben Finane, *Handel’s Messiah and His English Oratorios: A Closer Look* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 22. See also pp. 38–40 on Handel’s *Israel in Egypt* and the reaction to it.

sacred themes were not considered inappropriate, while actual use of Scripture was.

By Other Composers

There is a new setting of the same words by Sven-David Sandström, who, like Handel, is also not a native speaker of English. It is interesting to listen to this, if only because it shows that the combination of Jennens's libretto with music does not automatically become what Handel's *Messiah* has become. Here is an interview with the composer about the project.¹⁶



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=59#oembed-3>

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16. This interview with Soli Deo Gloria is shared on their YouTube channel.

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29. Lili Boulanger

In this chapter you will

- be introduced to a great composer if you're not already acquainted with her
- meet her famous sister as well
- consider the challenges that female composers faced in the twentieth century
- have the opportunity to ponder why amazing music is neglected in performances in our time

Lili Boulanger died tragically young. One can scarcely imagine what the scope and significance of her works might have been if she had lived longer. Yet the works she created during her brief life are impressive and noteworthy both generally and in connection with the subject of this book.¹ Although universally referred to by her nickname, “Lili,” her full name was Marie-Juliette Olga Boulanger. Lili is almost always mentioned in connection with her sister Nadia. [Nadia Boulanger taught music in Paris and mentored a number of famous composers](#). She [taught and impacted the lives of such a large number of students, particularly from the United States](#), that American composer [Ned Rorem has described her](#) as “the [most](#)

1. A brief timeline and introduction may be found in Diane Peacock Jezic, *Women Composers: The Lost Tradition Found* (New York: Feminist Press), 139–46.

[influential](#) teacher since Socrates.”² Another American composer, Virgil Thomson, wrote in a tribute to her that it was a matter of American legend that every town had a “five and dime” store and a student of Nadia Boulanger.³ In 1913, [Lili became the first woman](#) to win the [Prix de Rome](#), one of the world’s most prestigious awards in the arts, which was instituted in the seventeenth century (and abolished in the twentieth). Soon after Lili died at the untimely age of twenty-four, Nadia [ceased composing](#), evaluating her own works as “worthless.”⁴ In [comparing](#) their lives as well as considering them together, we get a clearer sense of how each succeeded in navigating a musical world in which there were still many obstacles for female composers.⁵

Listen to these two psalm settings ([Psalm 24, “The Earth Is the Lord’s,”](#) and [Psalm 130, “Out of the Depths”](#)) by Lili Boulanger, which would be remarkable under any circumstances but seem all the more so when we consider how young the composer was when she wrote them.⁶

2. Ned Rorem, “Nadia Boulanger (Composer, Conductor),” Bach Cantatas, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Boulanger-Nadia.htm>.
3. Virgil Thomson, “‘Greatest Music Teacher’—at 75,” *Music Educators Journal* 49, no. 1 (1962): 42–44 (here 42).
4. Lizzie Davis, “Ever Heard the Music of Lili Boulanger, One of the 20th Century’s Most Exciting Composers?,” *Classic FM*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/lili-boulanger/>.
5. On this, see Anna Beer, *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music* (London: Oneworld, 2016), 247–61.
6. The first recording is from 1968 of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Nadia Boulanger. The second features the [City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus Orchestra and BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Yan Pascal Tortelier](#). For an analysis of Lili Boulanger’s psalm settings, see Caroline Potter, *Nadia and Lili Boulanger* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 91–102.



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Robert Dimery writes, “Lili’s Catholic faith imbues her three psalm settings for chorus and orchestra with a fervent intensity. Psalm 24 has a feeling of wondrous joy, the modal harmonies adding a primitive, ancient quality. Her setting of Psalm 130 (aka ‘De Profondis’/‘Du fond de l’abîme’) possesses a sense of mystery fitting for a mystic vision of God’s presence.”⁷

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30. Arnold Schoenberg

In this chapter you will

- learn where the continual pressing of the boundaries of tonality led composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
- explore how Arnold Schoenberg's religious identity and musical work intersected
- consider the significance of the fact that the major turning points in Schoenberg's musical career occurred in conjunction with the creation of musical works with biblical connections

Escaping from Bondage to Tonality

We have made analogies already between music and language. Languages and music depend on rules and structure to communicate in traditional ways. Yet there has always been, alongside the following of rules and conformity to structures, a countervailing current of creativity in which people have coined new words and expressions, ventured outside of standard grammar, and in other ways experimented with and pressed the boundaries of what is standard to create new possibilities for expression. Languages evolve, and whether we listen to older music or read older text, it sounds foreign to us and sometimes highly formulaic.

What we notice most are the structures that are adhered to that no longer constrain us and the archaic expressions that stand out because they are no longer used as they once were. Something that was exciting and new at one point seems bland and uninteresting to those experiencing it in later times. That is because what some pioneered in the past, others who came after them imitated until the exception became the rule and the unfamiliar became familiar.¹

Are there any limits to how free one can be with words in language or sounds in music? What would it mean to throw off the limits of vocabulary and grammar and feel truly free to use any words at all with no regard for structure? In spoken language, it could be interesting, but it would also not convey meaning in the way that words and language traditionally have. Once music had stayed almost entirely within a key signature and a set of seven different notes (think [do-re-mi](#), etc.), occasionally adding additional notes to liven things up but always returning to the original key. By the late nineteenth century, however, music had reached a point where it could move freely in almost any direction. Composers had been pushing musical language to its limits and had begun to feel no obligation to return at the end of a piece to the note or chord on which it had begun, as had been the norm in previous eras. This was akin to the discarding of rhyme and meter as constraints on poetry. A question that arose as a result was what, if anything, makes poetry “poetry” if it lacks those features that traditionally defined it. The same questions arose for music. Doesn’t music cease to be anything other than a blurry mess of sound without the traditions of key signature and harmony?

No name is more famously associated with pushing musical

1. One possible explanation for some of the irregular past tenses in languages, such as [“go” and “went,”](#) is that there were originally two verbs with related meanings. Eventually, through usage, speakers decided to keep the present tense of one and the past tense of the other.

experimentation to the limits of tonality and beyond than [Arnold Schoenberg](#). Having [first pioneered free atonality](#) (music without a tonal center), he is also famous for proposing a new approach to order in the midst of the chaos that he introduced, a form of music known as “[serialism](#).” Schoenberg found the possibilities of atonal music with no constraints of any sort to be too endless. Imagine if poetry could contain any letters in any order. Experimenting with that absolute freedom soon becomes boring, while at the same time, the lack of any boundaries and constraints can be paralyzing to our creativity. [Schoenberg](#) adopted an approach that called for each of the twelve possible notes on traditional Western instruments to be used only once until each note had its turn. This is called serial music because the possible combinations of notes can be ordered in a series, or “[tone row](#).” For those who are interested in exploring this further, here is a YouTube video by Vi Hart that explains the concept in an accessible way.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4niz8TfY794>

The Bible and Schoenberg's Vision

Some of Schoenberg's most important works explore biblical stories in some way, in particular an oratorio called [Jakobsleiter](#) (Jacob's Ladder) and his opera [Moses und Aron](#). The former marked his shift in the direction of the serial [twelve-tone technique](#). He was a visionary and leading an exodus from older forms and ways of doing things. Neither work was completed by the composer. Both offer unconventional takes on the biblical story they explore. Here is his *Jakobsleiter*.²



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=61#oembed-1>

The work is inspired as much by the idea of modern human beings wrestling with God and spirituality as by the story in Genesis. Schoenberg wrote, “For a long time I have been wanting to write an oratorio on the following subject: modern man, having passed through materialism, socialism, and anarchy, and despite having been an atheist, still having in him some residue of ancient faith (in the form of superstition), wrestles with God (see also Strindberg’s ‘Jacob Wrestling’) and finally succeeds in finding God and becoming religious.”³ The reference to wrestling with God has the story in [Genesis 32:22–32](#) in mind. As already mentioned, Schoenberg never completed work on *Jakobsleiter*. That is perhaps fitting, or at least appropriately symbolic, given how Schoenberg’s spiritual and musical quests opened up new possibilities that continued beyond the composer’s own lifetime.

conducted by Kent Nagano. Shared on Jonathan Schabbi’s YouTube channel.

3. Letter to Richard Dehmel, December 13, 1912, quoted in [Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “Musical Hebraism,” *Commentary Magazine*, July 1967](#). See also Bryan R. Simms, *The Atonal Music of Arnold Schoenberg, 1908–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151–53.

Exodus from Egypt and Convention

In [Moses und Aron](#), the latter is not the usual spelling of the name of Moses's brother in German. This spelling is adopted because the result is that twelve letters are in the title. The significance of twelve tones for Schoenberg resonates with the symbolism of the number twelve in the Bible as first and foremost connected with the number of tribes of Israel. Here is a performance by the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra and the Opera Festival of Miskolc.⁴



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The [mockery that Moses receives](#) for his vision of one God, perfectly abstract and not to be depicted in images, conveys Schoenberg's own feelings about the negative reactions to his own musical vision. The tension regarding what music should be is conveyed as [Aron sings more melodiously](#) and leads the people in worshipping the golden calf (see [Exodus 32](#)), while Moses's own musical lines are much further removed from even echoes of traditional tonality. Schoenberg's musical journey needs to be considered in parallel and in conjunction with his religious journey from his Jewish upbringing to Protestantism and back to Judaism. The incompleteness of the work may seem symbolic of the open-endedness of the revolution that Schoenberg was at the forefront

4. Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Zoltan Kocsis and directed by Eszter Novák.

of. The composer provided his own explanation for why he wrestled unsuccessfully with completing the final act of the opera: “The most incomprehensible contradictions in the Bible have given me the greatest difficulty.”⁵ As Jack Boss writes, “This opera is about unresolved conflicts, principally Moses’ inability to communicate the Idea of God to his people without images, and the conflict that causes in him with his passionate belief that God may not be represented in image.”⁶

Concluding with a Psalm

One of Schoenberg’s last compositions included a setting of Psalm 130, [*De Profundis*](#).⁷

5. Letter to Walter Eidlitz, March 15, 1933, in *Schoenberg’s Program Notes and Musical Analyses*, ed. J. Daniel Jenkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Schoenberg_s_Program_Notes_and_Musical_A/8RM9DAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=“incomprehensible contradictions in the Bible”&pg=PT382&printsec=frontcover.
6. Jack Boss, *Schoenberg’s Twelve-Tone Music: Symmetry and the Musical Idea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 331.
7. Performance by the Los Angeles Zimriyah Chorale, conducted by Nick Strimple at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles on April 7, 2011. Recording shared on YouTube by Randol Schoenberg (the grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg and also of composer Eric Zeisl). There is also a [lecture by Mary-Hannah Klontz](#) about Schoenberg’s *De Profundis* with musical examples that illustrate not only Schoenberg’s compositional technique but also his sources in traditions of Jewish chant.



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=61#oembed-3>

It is interesting to jump back from this end point of Schoenberg's musical and spiritual journey to a work such as his *Friede auf Erden* (Peace on Earth), from the period when he had left tonality behind but before he developed the serial technique. It too has biblical connections, [the poem that Schoenberg set](#) being inspired by and alluding to a scene from the story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke ([2:14](#)). Although obviously lacking a tonal center compared to works from earlier eras of music, we can also hear how the musical landscape is less radical a departure than that of Schoenberg's later works.⁸



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=61#oembed-4>

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8. Performance by the YMCA Chamber Choir, conducted by Ragnar Bohlin. Licensed to YouTube by Naxos.

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31. John Rutter

In this chapter you will

- discover that not all composers in the twentieth century (and beyond) have sought to radically push the boundaries of musical language
- consider the significance of the fact that works by a composer who is a religious agnostic are found deeply moving and meaningful by religious people

John Rutter is a contemporary composer whose works are extremely popular with the general public. [Rutter has set a number of biblical texts to music](#). These include psalms, a Magnificat, and movements in his [Requiem](#) that are wholly or partly from the Bible. Here is the *Requiem* conducted by the composer himself.¹



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here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=62#oembed-1>

1. Performance in the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence, Italy, shared on YouTube by MidAmerica Productions.

The work as a whole features significant links between the beginning and the end (both in the words and in the music). But there are also echoes throughout, and in particular, the [“Pie Jesu”](#) includes musical echoes of more than one theme from the first movement. For me, the piece mirrors the trajectory of the Christian Bible from Genesis to Revelation: light in the beginning and then at the end and order and hope emerging out of chaos. Reflecting on this, I found it noteworthy how creation connects with lament in Job chapter 3: Job curses the day of his birth (i.e., wishes he had never been born), attempting through negations and inversions of key words from Genesis 1 to bring about an undoing of his own creation.² Rutter likewise brings us back into chaos (musically) before light appears.

The second movement has a dramatic and moving cello part that for me recalls the minor scale utilized to powerful effect in much Eastern European Jewish music, while the vocal cadences are reminiscent of those in African American spirituals. The voices shift to polyphony (different parts singing different notes in harmony) to provide a different character as the psalmist shifts from addressing God to addressing Israel. The sparser vocal line then returns to revisit the human call to God for help. There is a lot of back-and-forth, as fits the experience of grief.

The [“Sanctus”](#) is majestic and hopeful, the [“Agnus Dei”](#) minor and somber. The alternation continues with Psalm 23 contrasting with the feel of Psalm 130 as well as continuing the alternating peaceful and troubled feeling as we go from movement to movement. And then again, each movement itself includes contrasting emotions. That is the experience of grief, of loss, and of mourning, and music helps turn the words into something that

2. On this, see Samuel D. Giere, [A New Glimpse of Day One: Intertextuality, History of Interpretation, and Genesis 1.1–5](#) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 53.

we connect with emotionally at a deeper level.³ Right in the heart of the sixth movement, “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” we get a back-and-forth between choral voices in lament and an oboe attempting to restore the pastoral calm before they come back together in harmony once again. The ending feels less than final, as do so many of the psalms. This expresses hope, expectation, looking beyond the moment in uncertainty.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Rutter is an [agnostic](#). He nonetheless turns time and again to biblical texts as sources. Agnosticism and the Psalms mesh nicely together, since the words of the Psalms often express doubt, but Rutter’s settings of biblical texts are by no means limited to the Psalms. Consider what it tells us that someone can write music that profoundly moves people of faith without needing to share that faith. You can read more about Rutter and his agnosticism in an [interview he gave to Jared Bennett of Varsity magazine](#) and in his [interview with Alan Macfarlane](#). See as well his [interview with Mary Rogelstad](#). When it comes to living composers, we have the advantage of much more direct access to their influences, views, intentions, and interpretations of their own work.

3. For Rutter’s own perspective on music and emotion in his own words, see Andrew Palmer, “John Rutter,” in his *Encounters with British Composers* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), 405–16.

32. Christmas Carols

In this chapter you will

- learn about the music associated with the Christian celebration of Christmas, the holiday commemorating the birth of Jesus
- consider how traditions of biblical interpretation and the popularity of these songs have influenced one another and continue to do so

[Christmas carols](#) are songs of a religious character associated with the celebration of the Christian holiday of Christmas, which focuses on the birth of Jesus. This holiday is celebrated on December 25 by [Roman Catholics](#) and thus also by Protestants, since Protestantism emerged from Catholicism. Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate the holiday on [January 7](#). Neither date is indicated in the Bible, and the difference reflects a historical use of two different calendars, Gregorian and Julian. Many churches also consider the weeks before Christmas the season of Advent. Historically, Western churches also recognize twelve days of Christmas, beginning on Christmas and ending with Epiphany on January 6, which focuses on the arrival of the magi. Christmas carols provide another opportunity not only to consider the connection between music and the celebration of holidays but also to see how music influences people's interpretation of the text. Song lyrics of course reflect the interpretation of their author, but they may in turn communicate that interpretation to others. For example, the very idea that Jesus

was actually born on December 25 (rather than this being a date chosen by Christians to celebrate the event) is communicated and reinforced by the many songs that say “Christ was born today” or something similar. In the same way, songs like “Away in a Manger” (with its line “the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes”) and “Silent Night” convey the impression of the birth being a serene and reverent event, which is not typically the case when it comes to human childbirth and is not supported by anything in the Bible.

Christmas carols continue to be written, even as many favorites of the past continue to be familiar and are sometimes given new arrangements and adaptations. Most of the carols that continue to be heard and sung regularly are from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the oldest that is still very familiar is [“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks,”](#) which dates from 1700. [Jeremy Dibble, a professor of Musicology at Durham University,](#) discovered while doing research on the history of hymns that “‘While shepherds watched’ was the first carol to cross over from secular traditions to the church. It was the only Christmas hymn to be approved by the Church of England in the eighteenth century and this allowed it to be disseminated across the country with the Book of Common Prayer. Only at the end of the eighteenth century was it joined by other well-known texts such as ‘Hark the herald angels sing.’”¹ The lyrics by Nahum Tate stick closely to the narrative in [Luke chapter 2](#), and this is probably one reason it was quickly accepted for use in church. The words have been sung to a number of melodies, including some written specifically for that purpose, including famously by [George Frideric Handel](#).

The carol [“Adam Lay Ybounden”](#) is from about three centuries earlier than [“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks.”](#) As a result, the English lyrics require translation to be understood

1. Jeremy Dibble, quoted in “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks on ‘Ilkley Moor,’” Durham University News, December 15, 2009, <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-shepherds-flocks-ilkely.html>.

today even by a native English speaker, since the language has changed and evolved over the past six hundred years, just as musical language has. Its reference to Adam having eaten an apple reflects a long-standing tradition about the type of fruit produced by the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, whereas Genesis doesn't specify this. The idea of Mary becoming heaven's queen is likewise postbiblical. The song's overall conclusion that it was a good thing that the forbidden fruit was taken because of what ultimately resulted will surprise many modern listeners. Here is John Rutter, whose work as a composer was the focus of the previous chapter, conducting the Cambridge Singers.²



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=63#oembed-1>

“The First Noel” combines the shepherds tending their sheep from the Gospel of Luke with the wise men and the star from the Gospel of Matthew. This is common in Christmas pageants as well as music, but it obscures the fact that significant differences exist between the two accounts. They are, at the very least, set at different times in the childhood of Jesus, and a careful look at the details, such as the geographical movements of the family, suggests they may be impossible to harmonize. Musical treatments, on the other hand, make doing so appear quite simple. The song also states that there were three wise men, another detail not actually found in

2. Performance by John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers of Boris Ord's arrangement of “Adam Lay Ybounden.” Shared by John Rutter and the Cambridge Singers on their own YouTube channel.

the Bible. In order to convey a more culturally appropriate sense of the story in Luke's Gospel, New Testament scholar [Kenneth Bailey](#) created a Christmas drama called [Open Hearts in Bethlehem](#). In all these examples, you can see how Christmas carols spread and perpetuate frameworks of interpretation that impact how stories in the Bible are perceived and understood by those who read them at any point during the year, not merely at Christmas.

For Further Reading

Bailey, Kenneth. "The Manger and the Inn: A Middle Eastern View of the Birth Story of Jesus." Presbyterian Outlook, December 21, 2006, <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/>.

———. "The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7." *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 2, no. 2 (1979): 33–44.

Larsen, Timothy, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Christmas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Whiteley, Sheila, ed. *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

33. Arvo Pärt

In this chapter you will

- be introduced to the living composer whose works have been performed most often
- consider the impact of being a composer in the context of the Soviet Union during the Communist era
- hear musical settings of texts that are rarely ever set to music
- learn about the intersection of religion with a very different response to modernity than the atonal one of Schoenberg and his school

[Arvo Pärt](#) has the honor of being the living composer whose works have been performed the most. [The style that he developed is known as “tintinnabuli” because of its bell-like sounds.](#) In the period in the composer’s life right before he developed that distinctive style, as he was working his way there, the Bible played a significant role. Composing in Estonia when it was part of the Soviet Union, he gave a work of his the vague title [“Modus”](#) but later revealed the name he had wished to give it all along, [“Sarah Was 90 Years Old”](#) (referring to the story in [Genesis 17:17; 21:1–7](#)).





One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=64#oembed-1>

Pärt has also set some texts that are less obvious choices to music—for instance, a genealogy from the Gospel of Luke ([3:23–38](#)) in his work [“Which Was the Son Of...”](#)¹



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=64#oembed-2>

[Another example](#) is [Tribute to Caesar](#) (setting [Matthew 22:15–22](#)). Pärt has also [composed other works that set biblical texts to music](#) that might be considered more obvious choices, including his [Passio \(St. John Passion\)](#), [The Beatitudes](#) (from [Matthew 5](#)), [I Am the True Vine](#) ([John 15:1–14](#)), [The Woman with the Alabaster Box](#) ([Luke 7:36–50](#)), and [And One of the Pharisees](#) ([Luke 7:36](#)).² He is sometimes compared to other composers of sacred music in our time, such as John Tavener, [Henryk Górecki](#), [Alan Hovhaness](#), and many more who are often labeled [“holy minimalists”](#) or [“sacred minimalists,”](#)

1. Performance by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir conducted by Paul Hillier and licensed to YouTube by Harmonia Mundi.
2. His *Passio* is discussed in [chapter 26](#) along with other Passions.

labels that these composers do not consider helpful. [Minimalism](#) is a reaction against atonality that sought a return to the roots of traditional music, exploring the simplicity of the tonal idiom, usually with very sparse instrumentation and much repetition.

Theologian Rob Saler of Christian Theological Seminary has this to say about the role of the Bible in Pärt's music: "As scholars such as Peter Bouteneff and others have shown, in most of Arvo Pärt's mature compositions, he is either directly setting a sacred text to music or is using the cadence of that text as chanted in liturgical settings to guide his compositional choices. In a conversation that I once had with the composer, he shared with me that he seeks to inhabit the texts that he sets to music before, during, and even after the act of composition itself—in a way, he invites listeners to inhabit the texts sonically even as, in so doing, the texts start to permeate the lives of listeners."³

For Further Reading

Hillier, Paul. *Arvo Pärt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Shenton, Andrew. "Magnificat: Arvo Pärt the Quiet Evangelist." In *Exploring Christian Song*, edited by M. Jennifer Bloxam and Andrew Shenton, 155–70. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017.

3. Dr. Rob Saler, personal correspondence.

34. Andrea Clearfield

In this chapter you will

- learn how one contemporary composer draws on a range of historical and contemporary sources in producing her own unique creation
- have the opportunity to reflect on music as biblical interpretation and how music can help highlight neglected aspects of biblical stories about women

We mentioned Andrea Clearfield's *Women of Valor* suite and her "Hagar" in chapter 9 about Isaac and his family. More needs to be said about the former work. In the [program notes](#) to accompany performances of the piece, Clearfield writes,

The musical material for *Women of Valor* incorporates ancient Hebrew synagogue chants as well as other traditional melodies which are sung to the *Eishet Hayil* text. These melodies are woven through the piece like a tapestry, connecting threads between the old and the new. A Renaissance technique, *soggetto cavato dalle vocali*, was employed where a theme is carved out from the vowels of a phrase. Thus, the theme for the oratorio

was created from the vowels of “Women of Valor” where o-e-o-a-o becomes do-re-do-fa-sol. Likewise, the longer version of the theme, do-re-do-fa-sol-sol-la-ti, is derived from the vowels of the words “Women of Valor, Who Can Find?” and rises like this question from the opening of Proverbs 31. Heard in a multiplicity of forms, this theme pervades the work. Another structural element is shaped by the acrostic nature of Proverbs 31, which uses each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *Women of Valor* employs a 22-note scale which was devised from three synagogue prayer modes, providing a musical representation of the literary acrostic. Each line of the biblical text is sung on a consecutive degree of the scale, preceded by a chime tone.

While not an authentic representation of any traditional ritual, prayer or musical style, *Women of Valor* is influenced by cantorial ornamentation, biblical instruments, Jewish dance forms and Middle-Eastern and Sephardic music so that these elements became resources for color, melody, rhythm, phrasing and orchestration. Mixed meters, syncopated rhythms, traditional scales and percussion instruments such as the dumbek, rik (small tambourine), finger cymbals and sistrem add a Middle-Eastern ambience to the composition. Portions of ancient melodic patterns, called tropes, sung to the Torah, can be heard in the Sarah, Miriam, Hannah and Ruth arias as well as in fragments and layers in the orchestral prelude and other interludes. The centerpiece of the work, “Miriam’s

Dance,” was inspired by the biblical heroine, Miriam, who led the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea. Among the tropes woven through the dance is the particular melodic pattern that is chanted to Miriam’s “Song of the Sea” in the Book of Exodus.¹

The entirety of those [program notes](#), as well as the additional information found on the [composer’s website](#), are all worth exploring in full detail. The excerpt above provides insight not only into the process of setting a biblical text to music but into approaches to composition more generally. The composer has found ways of embedding aspects of a text, right down to its structure and/or its vowel sounds, into the music. The work thus not only explores the biblical text but weaves in historical elements and instrumentation that connect this contemporary music with the historic musical traditions that have explored the same stories down through the ages.

You can hear more from the *Women of Valor* suite (whether in the full orchestral version or in a chamber arrangement) on the author’s website and on the YouTube channels of some whose performances of the work have been recorded. The LA Jewish Symphony has shared several of the movements of the full orchestral version.

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1. Andrea Clearfield, *Women of Valor* program notes, August 2009, <http://www.andreaclearfield.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Women-of-Valor-UPDATED-NOTES1.pdf>.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=65#oembed-1>

Soprano Anne Slovin has several performances of the chamber arrangement on YouTube.²



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Listening to the same movement or work in more than one arrangement can also help listeners appreciate aspects of the work in new ways. On Clearfield's own YouTube channel, you will also find another work of hers that sets biblical text in the form of one word: [“Alleluia.”](#)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

2. Anne Slovin, soprano, and Michael Gaertner, piano, perform Clearfield's *Women of Valor* on April 14, 2018, in the Auer Hall at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University.

here: [https://pressbooks.palni.org/
thebibleandmusic/?p=65#oembed-3](https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=65#oembed-3)

If you haven't already done so, now might be a good time to read [chapter 20 on alleluias and the nature of biblical allusions](#).

35. Roxanna Panufnik

In this chapter you will

- learn about the composer's diverse religious background
- consider how Jewish and Christian texts outside the Bible continue the exploration of biblical stories and themes in a manner similar to what composers do

If you have read this book through in order, you have already heard examples of the music of Roxanna Panufnik. One is linked to in chapter 17 on the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, the other in chapter 9 on the story of Isaac. Even a significant amount of her instrumental work draws on and explores biblical stories. In her setting of Psalm 136, [Love Endureth](#), she draws on Jewish chant. As the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Catholic father (her father was also a well-known composer, Andrzej Panufnik), it is no surprise to find she explores and addresses religious texts and themes in and through her music and has clearly articulated thoughts on subjects such as religious diversity and commonality. In an interview with the *Jewish Chronicle*, she said of her violin concerto *Abraham*, “I was five months pregnant with my first child and I suddenly began to panic about what kind of a world I was bringing a baby into. There’s so much common ground between the faiths. I knew I couldn’t change the world by trying to express my feelings in music, but it started me on a quest to build musical bridges between faiths. Our

various faiths may take different paths, but they all go in the same direction, towards the same one God.”¹ She says more about this in her interview with *Classic FM*. Listen closely to the ways that she engages not only with biblical text but with some of the diverse forms of musical expression you have read about in this book.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online

here: <https://pressbooks.palni.org/thebibleandmusic/?p=66#oembed-1>

In the [interview with the Jewish Chronicle](#) already mentioned, Panufnik also shares that she began exploring her Jewish roots while a student at the Royal Academy of Music. She says there, “My first Jewish work was a setting of the Shemah, and it was performed at my father’s funeral.”² The [Shema](#) is [Deuteronomy 6:4](#), one of the most important texts that is felt to capture and sum up what is central to Judaism: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It features prominently in [Jewish prayer](#).

Panufnik has also explored biblical texts in ways that transcend any one religious tradition, as you will have heard in the interview. She has also explored beyond the canon of Scripture

1. “Why Her Music Is a Religious Experience, Three Times Over,” *Jewish Chronicle*, April 19, 2012, <https://www.thejc.com/culture/features/why-her-music-is-a-religious-experience-three-times-over-1.32950>.
2. See also her interview with Stephen Darlington in Roxanna Panufnik, “Beyond a Mass for Westminster,” in *Composing Music for Worship*, ed. Stephen Darlington and Alan Kreider (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 76–85.

into extracanonical texts, such as the [Infancy Gospel of Thomas](#). That text is a collection of stories that imagines what Jesus might have been like as a child in between the stories found in the New Testament Gospels. It provided the basis for [Jessica Duchén's libretto](#) for [Panufnik's oratorio "Let Me In."](#) As a contemporary composer with this kind of background and musical output, she makes for a natural place to draw our exploration of music and the Bible to a close.

Conclusion

There is no way to summarize what this book covers, even if we were to omit all the things that it pointed to beyond itself. The intersection of the Bible and music includes more material, more perspectives, more questions raised and possibilities explored than a single book could ever do justice to. It seems appropriate to echo famous passages from the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Hebrews: there are many other works of music “that are not written in this book...” and “What more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of...” ([John 20:30–31](#); [21:25](#); [Hebrews 11:32](#)). Some will have read this book motivated by academic interest (or a course requirement), while others may have come here motivated by love of music and/or a personal faith. Hopefully the book offers something for everyone. You will get even more out of it if you listen repeatedly and engage in conversations with others who share your interest in this topic but with different motivations. These things were written to introduce you to this fascinating area of intersection, to whet your appetite, to begin your journey and exploration rather than bring it to a grand finale.

In an online workshop on the Bible and music, Rev. Catherine Duce of St. Martin of the Fields church in the UK pointed out that repeated listening unlocks new depths in music, just as repeated reading of a text—any text, scriptural or not—can lead to further insights. In the spiritual practice known as *lectio divina*, it is common not only to begin with a reading of Scripture but to read repeatedly, expecting the encounter with the text to grow deeper and richer through the repetition. While it can enhance one’s spiritual experience, that isn’t the only reason to reread. You’ve undoubtedly noticed new things in your second viewing of a movie. Repetition is not merely going over the same ground but going deeper into the same area in ways that are impossible on a first encounter. Whether your aim in reading this book is to understand

the Bible better, appreciate music more deeply, explore religion in popular culture, find spiritual enrichment, or some combination of those, repeated encounters with the text, with the music, and with the two together will unlock new doors and offer further rewards.

And so if you aren't sure what to do next, perhaps you should go back to the start of the book and begin reading and listening to the texts and music again. Despite what you may think, it won't be the same experience all over again.

Appendix I: Paths through This Book

With a digital/online text, it is even easier than with a print book to do what professors regularly do with textbooks—namely, mix up the order in which students are expected to read chapters/sections. In fact, although the book is structured in three main parts, that is not the order the author asks students to read materials in. It makes sense to jump from Bach as composer to the theme of Passions, for instance. But at several points, chapters earlier in the book offer you a chance to jump to the chapter about a specific composer who created a work that is an example of what that chapter is discussing. There is no need to follow a linear path through the book, whether you are reading it for your own interest or using it as a textbook in a course.

In this appendix you will find the author's own outline in case it provides a convenient structure for a course that you will use it in as a textbook. If this order doesn't work for you, try a different one, and if it works well for you and your students, please tell the author, as he may want to adopt your organization for his course as well!

Provisional Topic and Meeting Outline (Based on a Schedule of Two Meetings per Week)

First Meeting

Introduction to
the class: What is
music? What is the

Bible? Reading:

[Introduction](#)

Clarifying the
syllabus: Class
meetings, activities,
grading, earning
points

Week 1

Topic 1: Music
behind and in the
Bible. Reading: [1.](#)
[Ancient Music Behind](#)
[and in the Bible](#)

Topic 2: Chanting
Scripture in the
temple, synagogues,
and churches.
Reading: [2. Chanting](#)
[in Synagogues](#); [3.](#)
[Chanting in Churches](#)

Week 2

Topic 1: Impact of
the Protestant
Reformation; metrical
psalms. Reading: [4.](#)
[The Protestant](#)
[Reformation and](#)
[Metrical Psalms](#)

Topic 2: More on

translation,
paraphrase, retelling,
and meaning

Week 3: Creation in
Music and Creativity

Topic 1: Creation:
Haydn to Copland
and Beyond. Reading:
[7. Creation](#)

Topic 2: Creation
in Genesis and
musical creation
continued. Reading:
[Appendix 2: Making
Music with Apps,
Websites, and
Software](#)

Week 4: Combining
Texts

Topic 1: Handel as
entrepreneur and
biblical Stories as
entertainment.
Reading: [27. The Bible
as Musical, Oratorio,
and Opera](#)

Topic 2: Bringing
texts together:
Messiah, requiems,
and more. Reading:

[28. Handel's Messiah](#)

Week 5: The Story of
Jesus in Music and Film

Topic 1: Bach as
theologian. Reading:
[25. Johann Sebastian
Bach](#)

Topic 2: Passions:
From Bach to Mel
Gibson and beyond.
Reading: [26. Passions:
Bach and Beyond](#)

Week 6

Topic 1: Saul,
David, and Bathsheba.
Reading: [11. King
David \(and His Family,
Friends, and Enemies\)](#)

Topic 2: Music as
Prayer? Reading: [8.
Psalms; 18. Our Father](#)

Week 7

No class meeting:
Projects / spring or
fall break

Week 8

Topic 1:
Children's songs

(student show and tell)

Topic 2:
Children's songs
(continued)

Week 9 Moses and
the Exodus

Topic 1: Spirituals
and slavery. Reading:
[5. Spirituals](#); [10. Exodus](#)

Topic 2:
Schoenberg and
liberation from
tonality. Reading: [30. Arnold Schoenberg](#)

Week 10

Topic 1:
Magnificat and Nunc
Dimittis: Setting the
same text more than
once. Reading: [17. Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis](#)

Topic 2: Romance
in the Bible? Ruth,
Song of Songs,
Delilah, and Esther.
Reading: [14. Song of](#)

[Songs](#); 13. [Romance in the Bible? Ruth and Boaz, Samson and Delilah](#); 16. [Salome](#)

Week 11

Topic 1: Secular biblical music and “holy minimalism”

Reading: [31. John Rutter](#); [33. Arvo Pärt](#)

Topic 2: Popular music. Reading: [20. Alleluias and Allusions](#); [9. Isaac and Family](#)

Week 12: Scavenger Hunt and Allusions

Topic: Students earn one point per example of a pop (not “classical” or “worship”) song with the relevant biblical reference, plus one additional point for explanation of meaning.

Week 13: Work on Final Projects

Topic: If time
permits, include
reading: [21. Biblical
Music without Words](#)

Week 14: Student
Presentation of Final
Projects

Appendix 2: Making Music with Apps, Websites, and Software

Being creative and exploring the intersection of the Bible and music are things you should participate in and not merely learn about on a theoretical level. A great many websites, apps, and software programs can assist you in that process in whatever form you care to engage in it.

For online music-making using websites where you don't need to download and install anything, you might try [Chrome Music Lab](#), [Sampulator](#), [Patterns sketch](#), [Beatmaker](#), [BeepBox](#), and [Drumbit](#). These vary as to whether they let you use a range of instruments or focus on melody, chords, or rhythm. Also fascinating as a highly unusual way of making music is [Typatone](#). Websites come and go, so if you find that any listed here have disappeared or come across new ones that you find are good but not mentioned here, please share that with the author! There are apps that do some of these things, such as Autochords. Many apps require that you pay or continually prompt you to upgrade, but some free ones are impressively good, and many that are free but with limitations on their functionality unless you upgrade are still very useful in their free version. For instance, the iOS app Auxe has enough free sounds and functionality built in to make it useful without a purchase being required.

There are apps that can help you learn an instrument and YouTube videos that can help you learn to sing. In any of those cases, you'll probably use your phone's video app to record yourself so you can listen. You might also use a desktop computer program like [Audacity](#) or an iOS app like GarageBand and then experiment with adding reverb to your voice.

For writing music and creating a score, there are [free programs](#) like [MuseScore](#). You may want to experiment with a free [Digital Audio Workstation \(DAW\)](#). [LMMS](#) is a good example of one that is open source and has an impressive range of functionality. GarageBand is great for this as well. Search for “DAW” in the app store and try others. You can find tutorials on how to use these on their websites as well as on YouTube and elsewhere.

Search and explore. Many tools are available today for free that a few decades ago music creators could only dream of and would certainly have paid money for if they existed!

Appendix 3: For Further Listening

This book will continue to grow and expand, another advantage of its digital-first format. Yet even so, not every work that could theoretically be included will be. Encyclopedic works provide brief information about many more works than a textbook can. For those who wish to explore further, here are some of the works that are not included in this book—at least not yet. Listing them here may not be especially useful, but it should, if nothing else, convey a sense of just how much music is related to the Bible and encourage you to not end your exploration of it with this book but rather treat this book as an invitation into a world whose surface you've barely scratched. Since other sources provide lists that are either alphabetical or chronological, this one seeks to place side by side works with similar textual or thematic content or that conversely provide interesting contrasts. Any arrangement—alphabetical, chronological, by religious background of composer, by text(s) set—offers an organizational system optimal to some needs while being inconvenient for others. Eventually, it would be wonderful to have an interactive database of music related to the Bible, where all the information can be rearranged with a click or two. Perhaps some reader of this book will be inspired to create that. Perhaps one day I will find the time to do it. Until then, hopefully what is provided here will still be useful, if only in leading to the discovery of new music.

In short, if you are looking for music by a particular composer or from a particular era, other resources already exist that will connect you with what you are looking for, and in this digital format, you can search and find names and words easily. The aim here is to provide a gateway to what the book you have been reading has hopefully led you to seek—namely, a journey of

discovery that will keep bringing new and unexpected things your way.

Genesis (Including but Not Limited to Creation)

Jean-Francois Laseur, *La mort d'Adam*

Franz Baur, *Genesis—Die Schöpfung; Amartema—Der Sündenfall*

Thomas Adès, *In Seven Days*

Vicente Barrientos Yopez, *Creationem*

Charles Wuorinen, *Genesis*

Larry Alan Smith, *Symphony no. 2, “Genesis/Antietam”*

Genesis, *“In the Beginning”*

Gabriel Fauré, [*“La chanson d’Ève.”*](#) op. 95

Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, *The Apple Tree, Act I: The Diary of Adam and Eve*

Xavier Montsalvatge, *El Arca de Noé*

Oscar Navarro, *El Arca de Noe*

Ludolf Nielsen, [*Babelstårnet*](#) (Tower of Babel), op. 35

Elinor Remick Warren, *Abram in Egypt*

Igor Stravinsky, *The Flood; Abraham and Isaac*

Franz Schubert, *Hagar’s Lament*

Jesús Guridi, *Lamento e imprecación de Agar*

[*Eric Zeisl, Jacob and Rachel*](#)

Darius Milhaud, *Reves de Jacob*, op. 294

Krzysztof Penderecki, *The Dream of Jacob*

Robert Starer, *Joseph and His Brothers; Va’havta*

Richard Strauss, [*Josephslegende, op. 63*](#)

The prologue to the Gospel of John draws on language from Genesis and has been set to music:

Anne Dudley, [*The Testimony of John*](#)

Alexander Campkin, *True Light* (also *Miserere Mei*)

Gabriel Jackson, *In the Beginning Was the Word*

Knut Nystedt, *The Word Became Flesh*, op. 162

[Enjott Schneider](#), *In Principio Erat Verbum*

Psalms

Giacomo Meyerbeer, Psalm 86, Psalm 124

Louis Lewandowski, Psalms 16, 21, 23, 25, 36, 37, 39, 42–43, 46, 51, 62, 67, 84, 85, 90, 100, 103 (Enosh, vv. 15–17), 121, 130, 134, 150

Julius Chajes, Psalm 134; The 142nd Psalm

Isadore Freed, Psalm 8

Salomon Sulzer, Psalm 133

Bonia Shur, Psalm 23

Herbert Fromm, Psalm 23; *Grant Us Peace*; also *Song of Miriam* (and many other works)

Ben-Zion Orgad, [Mizmorim](#); [Hallel](#)

Yehezkel Braun, [Hallel Service](#)

Srul Irving Glick, *Psalm Trilogy*

Darius Milhaud, *3 Psalms of David*, op. 339

Karl Weigl, [Psalm 71](#); also [Symphony no. 5, “Apocalyptic”](#)

Hans Schanderl, Psalm 90

Nicola LeFanu, *Verses from Psalm 90*

Alfred Rose, Psalm 92

Eric Zeisl, [Requiem Ebraico](#)

Leo Rosenbluth, Psalm 93

Miriam Gideon, *Adonai Malakh* (Psalm 93); Psalm 128

Yehudi Wyner, *Shiru Ladonai* (Psalm 96)

Leonard Bernstein, *Chichester Psalms*

Herman David Koppel, *3 Psalms*, op. 48; *Two Psalms*, op. 55; *Two Biblical Psalms*, op. 59; also *Five Biblical Songs*, op. 46; *Four Old Testament Songs*, op. 49; *Three Songs on Psalm 142, the Song of Songs and Psalm 100*

Abraham Kaplan, *Psalms of Abraham*

Betty Olivero, [Lo Ira Ra](#); [Bakashot](#); Tehilim
[Aharon Harlap](#), [Psalm 120](#); [Psalm 122](#); [Three Psalms](#); [Shiru L'Adonai](#)
 Jean Berger, Psalm 23, "The Lord to Me a Shepherd Is"
 Heinrich Schalit, Psalm 23: The 23rd Psalm
 Maurice Jacobson, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*
 Martin Kalmanoff, *The Lord Is My Shepherd* (Psalm 23)
 Avner Dorman, Psalm 67
 Robert Strassburg, Psalm 117
 Greg Knauf, Psalm 117 "Laudate Dominum omnes gentes"
 Ioseb Bardanashvili, Psalm 121
 Leon Algazi, 3 *Chants Hebraïques Traditionnels* (No. 3 "Versets du Psaume 144")
 Jack Gottlieb, *Shout for Joy*; *Psalmistry*
 Gershon Kingsley, *Jazz Psalms*
 Aaron Copland, *Four Motets*
 J. Klein, Psalm 150 (from *Hear O Israel*)
 Samuel Adler, Psalm 23; *A Psalm Trilogy*
 Robert Starer, *Psalms of Woe and Joy*; *Two Sacred Songs*; *A Psalm of David* (13th Psalm); others
 Abraham Kaplan, *Glorious*
 Artemy Vedel, [By the Rivers of Babylon](#)
 Sergei Taneyev, *On the Reading of a Psalm* (based on Psalm 50)
 Viktor Kalinnikov, *Blazhen Muzh*
 Anatoly Lyadov, *Perelozheniya iz obikhoda*—no. 9, "Khvalite Gospoda s nebes"
 Alexander Zemlinsky, Psalm 13, op. 24
[Mary Montgomery Koppel](#), [Psalm 13](#)
 Alexander Arkhangelsky, Psalm 141
 Alexander Grechaninov, ["Kvalite Boga"](#) (Praise the Lord), Cantata for mixed chorus and orchestra, op. 65
 Vladimir Fainer, *Accedite ad eum* (Psalm 33:6)
 Alan Hovhaness, [Symphony no. 12, op. 188: Psalm 23 "The Lord Is My Shepherd"](#); *Make Haste*, op. 86; *Out of the Depths*, op. 142, no. 3; Psalm 130 "Cantate Domino," op. 385; Psalm 143, "Hear My Prayer, O Lord," op. 149; and others

Carmen Petra-Basacopol, *Din Psalmii lui David*
 Sofia Gubaidulina, *Jauchzt vor Gott; De Profundis*
 John Tavener, Psalm 121
 Dinos Constantinides, *Concerto of Psalms* (inspired by Psalms 19, 130, and 150)
 Daniel Selichius, *Opus novum*
 William Byrd, *Laudibus in sanctis* (Psalm 150); *Hear My Prayer O Lord; O Lord Rebuke Me Not; Have Mercy Upon Me O God; Teach Me O Lord; I Will Give Laud*
 Orlando di Lassus, *Psalmi Davidis poenitentiales*
 Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, *Genevan Psalter* (Psalms 1, 2, 6, 7, 24, 25, 27, 36, 47, 77, 90, 96, 98, 112, 135, 137, 141, and 150)
 Kaspar Förster, *Benedicam Dominum*
 Peter Philips, *Ascendit Deus*
 Alberik Mazak, Psalms 109–12, 116
 W. A. Mozart, *Laudate Dominum* K. 339
 Nicolas Bernier, *Laudate Dominum quoniam; Miserere Mei Deus*
 Franz Schubert, Psalm 23, op. 132, D. 706
 Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger, *3 Psalmen* op. 40
 Franz Liszt, Psalms 13, 18, 125, 129, and 137
 George Palmer, *3 Psalms*
 Théodore Dubois, *Cantate Domino*
 Imant Raminsh, *Cantate Domino*
 Joseph Vella, *Salm* 89, op. 43
 Marty Haugen, Psalms 16, 23, 66, and 136
 Jean Martinon, *Psaume CXXXVI* (Chant des captifs), op. 33
 Ali Ufki (Wojciech Bobowski), *Genevan Psalter: Psalms 2 and 6*
 Philipp Dulichius, *Motets*
 Andrzej Hakenberger, *Pelplin Tablature*
 Louis Bourgeois, *Ainsi qu'on oit le cerf bruire*, “Psalm 42” (from *Pseaumes Octantetrois de David*, mis en rime François par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze)
 Claude Goudimel, Psalms (40, 137)
 Claude Le Jeune, *O Dieu, je n'ay Dieu fors que toy*, “Psalm 63”; *Du fons de ma pensee*, “Psalm 130”

Paschal de l'Estocart, *Reveillez vous chacun fidele*, "Psalm 33";
 Estans assis aux rives aqua-tiques, "Psalm 137"

Nicolas Vallet, Psalm 8

Melchior Franck, *Laetatus sum* (Psalm 121)

Crato Bütner, Psalm 113 (*Laudate Pueri Dominum*); Psalm 147

Leonhard Paminger, *Domine, ne in furore tuo* (Psalm 38); *In exitu Israel de Aegypto* (Psalm 114/115); Psalm 110

Johann Gottlieb Naumann, Psalms 96 and 103

Michael Praetorius, *Das ist mir lieb*, "Psalm 116"

Heinrich Schütz, *Psalmen Davids samt etlichen Moteten und Concerten*, op. 2, SWV 22-47; Der 100. Psalm, SWV 36

Henry Lawes, Psalm VIII

Orlando Gibbons, "O Clap Your Hands" (Psalm XLVII); "O Lord in Thy Wrath" (Psalm 6:1-4); "Lift Up Your Heads" (Psalm 24); Psalm 47

John Mundy, *Sing Joyfully*

Constantijn Huygens, *Pathodia Sacra et Profana*

David Moritz Michael, *Der 103te Psalm*

Humfrey Pelham, *O Give Thanks unto the Lord; O Lord My God; By the Waters of Babylon*; also *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*

George Frideric Handel, *Coronation Anthems (Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened; The King Shall Rejoice)*

Hermann Goetz, Psalm 137

Noel Edison, Psalm 121; Psalm 137

Kurt Thomas, Psalm 137, op. 4

Philip James, *By the Waters of Babylon*

Havergal Brian, *By the Waters of Babylon*

Robert Ross, *Song of Exile*

Healey Willan, *O Praise the Lord* (various psalms plus verses from Habakkuk)

Adrian Batten, *O Praise the Lord* (Psalm 117:1-2)

Charles Hylton Stewart, Psalm 23; Psalm 80

David Willcocks, Psalm 131

John Henry Maunder, "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem"

Edward Elgar, [Give unto the Lord\(Psalm XXIX\), op. 74](#); Psalm 48, op. 67; [Psalm 68](#)

Charles Villiers Stanford, Psalms 147, 148, and 150

Hubert Parry, *I Was Glad When They Said unto Me*, op. 51; Psalm LXXXIV; Psalm 122

Howells, *Behold, O God Our Defender; God Is Gone up with a Merry Noise; Like as the Hart; Requiem* (incorporates Psalms 23 and 121)

Lennox Berkeley, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, op. 91, no. 1

Philip Stopford, [The Lord Is My Shepherd](#)

Will Todd, Psalm 23, “The Lord Is My Shepherd” (4th movement of his *Te Deum*)

Howard Goodall, *The Lord Is My Shepherd; O Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem / Rogate pacem* (Psalm 122)

Richard Elfyn Jones, [Psalm 46](#)

Louise Talma, *Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem* (from *Voices of Peace*)

Leo Sowerby, Psalm 122; Psalm 130

Ina Boyle, *Seven Psalms; Wilt Not Thou, O God, Go Forth with Our Hosts?; He That Hath Eternal Being; “Blessed Be the Lord, for He Hath Showed Me His Marvelous Kindness”*

Howard Hanson, *The 150th Psalm*

Carson Cooman, Psalm 29, op. 643; Ps. 104, op. 659; Ps. 118, op. 658; *Mercy and Truth*, op. 938

Conrad Susa, *The God of Love My Shepherd Is*

Bruce Neswick, *I Will Set His Dominion in the Sea; Harken to My Voice, O Lord, When I Call*

Carl Nielsen, *Three Motets*

Rihards Dubra, *Domine Dominus noster*

Jaakko Mantjarvi, *I Was Glad*

Gottfrid Berg, *Huru ljuvliga aro icke dina boningar* (How amiable are thy tabernacles); *Om de yttersta tingen*: no. 2; *Lar oss betanka huru fa vara dagar aro* (So teach us to number our days)

Daniel Pinkham, *Jubilee and Psalm; Miserere Mei Deus; Psalm Set*, Psalm 24; others

Gwyneth Walker, Psalm 23

David Matthews, Psalm 23 (*The Lord Is My Shepherd*), op. 90

Richard Yardumian, *Symphony no. 2, “Psalms”*

César Franck, [Psalm 150](#)

Felix Mendelssohn, Psalms 2, 22, 42, 43, 114, and 115

Nicolai Otto, Psalm 31, “Herr, auf dich traue ich”; Psalm 97, “Der Herr ist König”

Anton Bruckner, Psalms 112, 114, and 150

Zoltan Kodaly, Geneva Psalms 50, 114, 121, and 150; *Psalmus Hungaricus*, op. 13

Dan Forrest, *Jubilate Deo*

Florent Schmitt, [Psalm XLVII, op. 38](#)

E. J. Moeran, “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem”

Charles Martin Loeffler, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, op. 3

Emile Goué, Psalm XIII, Psalm CXXIII

Eric Delamarter, Psalms 46, 68, 80, and 104; also *The Testimony of John*

Arthur Honegger, *Mimaamaquim*

Joachim Raff, Psalm 130: *De Profundis*

Marcel Dupré, [De Profundis, op. 18](#)

Heinrich Kaminski, Psalm 130 (Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir)

Henry Wallford Davies, Psalm 130: *De Profundis*; also *Lift Up Your Hearts*, op. 20; *The Temple*; *Blessed Are the Pure in Heart*

Virgil Thomson, *De Profundis*

Marcin Tadeusz Łukaszewski, *De Profundis*

Łukasz Urbaniak, *De Profundis*

Raminta Serksnyte, *De Profundis*

Philippe Chamouard, *De Profundis*

Martin Bruce, *De Profundis* (also *Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis*)

Miłosz Bembinow, *Beatus vir...*

Romuald Twardowski, *Chwalitcie Imia Gospodnie; Chwali, dusze moja, Gospoda*

Józef Świder, *Laudate pueri; Deus in adiutorium; Laudate Dominum; Dixit Dominus; Beati omnes* (Psalm 127)

Michał Zieliński, *Laudate Dominum*

Andrzej Bielerzewski, *Cantate Domino canticum novum*

Paweł Łukaszewski, *Two Funeral Psalms*

Philippe Hersant, Psalm 130, “Aus tiefer Not”

Ernest Bloch, *Prelude and 2 Psalms* (114 and 137)

Max Reger, Psalm 100, op. 106
 Pauls Dambis, Psalm 19, Psalm 22, and Psalm 121
 Kristina Arakelyan, *You Know Me*
 Sven-David Sandström, Psalm 139, “Oh Lord, You Have Searched Me”
 Evelyn Simpson-Currenton, *My Soul Hath Refuge in Thee* “Psalm 91”
 Marga Richter, Psalm 91
 Jacob Druckman, Psalm 93
 Jean Langlais, Psalm 111, “Beatus vir”
 Charles Ives, Psalms 14, 24, 25, 42, 54, 67, 90, 100, 135, and 150
 Pavel Haas, Psalm 29, op. 12
 Fartein Valen, *Salme* 121
 Margaret Meachem, *Lift Thine Eyes unto the Mountains*
 Bruce Babcock, *Be Still*
 Arvo Pärt, *Peace upon You, Jerusalem*; [Psalom](#)
 Virpi Leppänen, *Kiittäkää Herran nimeä* (Praise ye the name of the Lord)
 Sisask Urmas, “Laudate Dominum” from *Gloria Patris*
 Krzysztof Penderecki, *Aus den Psalmen Davids*
 Philip Glass, Psalm 126; “Hymn” from *Akhenaten* (includes Psalm 104)
 Benjamin Britten, Psalm 150
 John Sanders, Psalm 150
 Colin Mawby, Psalm 150
 Virgil Thomson, *3 Antiphonal Psalms*; also *5 Phrases from the Song of Solomon*
 George Rochberg, *3 Psalms*
 Robin Orr, *Songs of Zion*
 Ēriks Ešenvalds, Psalm 67
 Paul Creston, Psalm 23
 Randall Thompson, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*
 Allen Pote, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*
 Bo Holten, Psalms 23 and 104
 Daniel Asia, Psalm 30
 Kenneth Leighton, *Lift Up Your Heads, O Ye Gates*
 Gregory Zduniak, Psalm 96: *Today Is Born Our Savior*

Pamela Decker, Psalm 102, Psalm 139
 Karel Boleslav Jiráček, Psalm 23 for Chorus and Orchestra
 Imant Raminsh, Psalms 23 and 121
 Daniel Manneke, Psalm 121
 David Briggs, Psalm 121
 Henry Cowell, [Psalm 121](#); Psalm VIII; Psalm 34
 Leevi Madetoja, Psalm 121
 Einojuhani Rautavaara, Psalm 23, Psalm 130
 Whitman Brown, Psalm 23
 Bobby McFerrin, [Psalm 23](#)
 David Goodenough, Psalm 133
 Bruce Babcock, *Be Still*
 Vytautas Miškinis, *Dilexi, Laudate pueri Dominum, Exultate Deo, Thoughts of Psalms*
 Stanisław Szczycinski, *Missa de Angelis*: Psalm 91, also *Pater Noster*
 Paweł Łukaszewski, *Psalmus 120, Psalmus 129*
 Wolfram Wagner, *Ad te, Domine*: Psalm 27 for Soli, Choir and Orchestra
 Michael John Trotta, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*; Psalm 145; Psalm 150; also *Set Me as a Seal*
 Paul Gibson, *Lauda Anima Mea*; Psalm 121 (My Help Comes from the Lord); also [My Sister, My Bride](#)
 Jack Beeson, *3 Settings from the Bay Psalm Book*
 Ross Lee Finney, *Pilgrim Psalms*
 Ned Rorem, *2 Psalms and a Proverb; Praise the Lord, O My Soul*
 Michael Ostrzyga, *Deus in adiutorium* (Psalm 70); *Dixit Dominus* (Psalm 109); *Lauda Jerusalem* (Psalm 147)
 Enjott Schneider, *Das ist meine Freude* (Psalm 73:28)
 Toivo Tulev, *Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt*; also *Magnificat*
 Uroš Krek, *Salmo LXII*
 Javier Busto, *Laudate pueri* (Psalm 112)
 Sebastian Schwab, *Nisi Dominus* (Psalm 126)
 David Dzubay, *Cantate Domino* (Psalm 98)
 Mordecai Sandberg, Psalm 130
 Robin Estrada, *Cæli enarrant*

Deborah Pritchard, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes unto the Hills*
 Grace Mary Williams, *Two Psalms*; Psalm 150
 George T. Walker, Psalm 96, Psalm 117
 Bruce Mahin, *Whitman Psalms*
 John Cage, *Apartment House 1776*
 Iša Krejčí, *Little Funeral Music* for Alto, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass, and Piano to Texts of the Psalms and František Halas's Poem "Old Women" (1933; rewritten 1936); Trio for Violin, Violoncello, and Piano with a song for a female voice to the text of a psalm
 Dubrovay László, *A halál félelmei* (Circumdederunt me)
 Kurt Estermann, *digression: memoria*
 Frank La Rocca, *I Will Lift Mine Eyes*
 Goffredo Petrassi, Psalm IX
 Vesa Erkkilä, *Minun sieluni halajaa sinua*
 Tomas Peire Serrate, *Confitebor Tibi Domine*
 Robert Vuichard, *Psaume Huictisme de Clement Marot*
 Michael Hurd, *Praise Ye the Lord*; *O Come Let Us Sing unto the Lord*
 Don Walker, Psalms 8, 26, 96, 100, 121, 133, and 134; also *Magnificat*
 Elsa Barraine, *Deuxième Prélude et Fugue* (based on a Jewish Psalm melody)
 Ivan Moody, [Evloghise\(Psalms 134:3\)](#)
 James Cohn, *5 Psalm Dances*, op. 50; *4 Psalms for Women's Chorus and Piano*, op. 20
 Ralph Vaughan Williams, *O Clap Your Hands*
 John Rutter, *O Clap Your Hands*; *Lord, Thou Hast Been Our Refuge*; *O Lord, Thou Hast Searched Me Out*; *Wells Jubilate*; *Psalmfest*; Psalm 150
[Delvyn Case](#), [Psalms of Ascent](#); [Psalm 150 for Unaccompanied Flute](#); [Psalm 133](#) (all instrumental)
 Judith Lang Zaimont, [My Heart within Me Is Desolate\(Psalms 143:4\)](#); Psalm 23; also *Ashes Are the Bread I Eat* (from *Lamentations*)
 Joelle Wallach, [Beside the Still Waters\(Psalms 23\)](#); [Psalm 126](#); [Shir Hamaalot](#); *V'Shamru*; also *V'erastich li l'olam* (a Biblical Love Song from Hosea)
 Josh Rodriguez, [Sondea\(Psalms 139\)](#)

Joseph Jones, [Psalm 33](#)
[Bobby Ge, A Mere Breath\(Psalm 39\)](#)
Michel Klein, [Ura\(Psalm 57\)](#)
Jee Seo, [Deus Misereatur\(Psalm 67:1-2\)](#)
Phil Keaggy, Psalm 121
Chris Tomlin, Psalm 100
Grace [Semler](#) Baldridge, [Psalm 102](#)
Louise B. Calixte, Psalm 69
Luc Van Hove, Psalm 22
Jonny Greenwood, Psalm 22 (from *The Power of the Dog* soundtrack)
Jessi Colter, *The Psalms*

Moses and the Exodus

C. P. E. Bach, *Die Israeliten in der Wüste*
Franz Schubert, *Miriam's Song of Triumph*
Hubert Parry, *Long Since in Egypt's Plenteous Lands*</p>
<p>Thomas Linley, *The Song of Moses*
Anton Rubinstein, *Moses*
Max Bruch, *Moses*, op. 67
Herman David Koppel, *Moses*, op. 76
Darius Milhaud, *Moise*, op. 219, "Opus americanum no. 2"
Stefan Wolpe, *The Man from Midian Suite*
Also related: Franz Waxman, *Joshua*

Song of Songs

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, *Song of Songs*
Jacobus Clemens non Papa, *Ego flos campi*
Thomas Morley, *O Amica Mea*
Emmanuel Chabrier, *La Sulamite*
Paul von Klenau, *Sulamith*

Percy Grainger, *Love Verses from the Song of Solomon*, King Solomon's Espousals

Jean Yves Daniel-Lesur, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*

Patrick Burgan, *Cantique des Cantiques*

Patrick Hawes, *Song of Songs*

Lazare Saminsky, *Second Hebrew Song Cycle*, op. 13: The Song of Songs

Herman David Koppel, *Four Love Songs from the Canticles of Solomon*

Rued Langgaard, *From the Song of Solomon*, BVN 381

Sid Robinovich, *Song of Songs*

Jorge Liderman, *The Song of Songs*

Nicola LeFanu, *Il Cantico dei Cantici II*

Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Flos Campi Suite*

Benjamin Britten, *My Beloved Is Mine*

Stephen Paulus, *Arise My Love*

David Bednall, *Rise Up, My Love*

Peter Hope, *Song of Solomon*

Stephen Danker, *Song of Solomon* (Symphony no. 3)

Jonathan Leshnoff, *Song of Songs*

Zdeněk Lukáš, *Písň Šalomounovy*

Pablo Casals, *Nigra Sum*

Sebastian Schwab, *Nigra Sum*

Healey Willan, *Rise Up, My Love*

Carson Cooman, *The Rose of Sharon; Rise Up, My Love*

James Rolfe, *Garden; O That You Would Kiss Me*

William Walton, *Set Me as a Seal upon Thy Heart*

Max Helfman, *Set Me as a Seal; The Voice of My Beloved*

Nico Muhly, *Set Me as a Seal*

Rene Clausen, *Set Me as a Seal*

Naji Hakim, *Set Me as a Seal upon Your Heart*

Anatolijus Šenderovas, *Simeni kahotam al libecha*

Vytautas Miškinis, *In lectulo meo*

A. C. Kostić, *Pesma nd Pesmama*

Ella Milch-Sheriff, *Dark Am I but Lovely*

Sergei Slonimsky, *Solomon's Song of Songs*; also *David's Psalms*
Forrest Pierce, *The Twelve Kisses*
Granville Bantock, *The Song of Songs*
John La Montaine, *Songs of the Rose of Sharon*; *Fragments from the Song of Songs*

Wisdom Literature

Darius Milhaud, *Cantate des proverbes*
Wolfram Wagner, *Proverbia*
Leo Kraft, *A Proverb of Solomon*
James Rolfe, *Four Anthems for Four Seasons*; *Under the Sun*
John Rutter, *To Every Thing There Is a Season*
Steven Winteregg, *Reflections on Quoheleth*
Stefan Węglowski, *Kohelet*
Paul Patterson, *Ecclesiastes* (from *Requiem*, op. 19)
Anatoly Korolev, *Ecclesiast*
Ernst Toch, *Vanity of Vanities*
Granville Bantock, *Vanity of Vanities*
Chris Thile, [Ecclesiastes 2:24](#)
Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, *Hiob*
C. Hubert Parry, *Job*
Philip Sawyers, *Songs of Loss and Regret* no. 7, from the *Wisdom of Solomon*
Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Job—a Masque for Dancing*
Petr Eben, *Hiob*
Luigi Dallapiccola, *Job*
Simon Khorolskiy, [Искупитель мой жив](#) (My Redeemer lives)

Salome

Alexander Glazunov, *Introduction and Dance of Salome*

Akira Ifukube, *Salome* (Ballet)
Florent Schmitt, *La Tragedie de Salome*; also *Danse d'Abisag* for
Orchestra, op. 75
Jules Massenet, *Hérodiade*
Joseph Achron, *Danse de Salome*
Matthias Pintscher, *Hérodiade-Fragmente*
Mel Bonis, *Salomé*
Madame Edwarda, *Salomé*

Samuel, Saul, David, and Bathsheba

Lucio San Pedro, [Samuel](#)
G. F. Handel, *Saul*
Modest Mussorgsky, *Tsar Saul*
Egil Hovland, *Job*, Suite for Organ, op. 79
Ján Levoslav Bella, *Saul und David*, op. 7
Nicolas Gombert, *Lugebat David Absalon*
Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, *Le danze del Re David*
Arthur Honegger, *Le Roi David*
[Aharon Harlap](#), [David](#) and [Goliath](#)
Ståle Kleiberg, *David and Bathsheba*
Kirmo Lintinen, *David and Bathsheba*
David Barlow, *David and Bathsheba*
[Eyal Bitton](#), *King David*
Tim Rice, *King David*
Randall Thompson, *Last Words of David*
Stephen Melillo, *David*
William Billings, *David's Lamentation*
Ottorino Respighi, *Belkis Queen of Sheba*

Prophets

Felix Mendelssohn, *Elijah*

Malcolm Lipkin, *Naboth's Vineyard*

Rihards Dubra (and Jacobus Handl), *Duo Seraphim*

Edward Elgar, *The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me*

Michael Horvit, *The Prophecy of Amos; God Is with Us; You Shall Love the Lord Your God*

Jonathan Dove, *Seek Him That Maketh the Seven Stars*

Marga Richter, *Seek Him*

Johan Helmich Roman, *Vid Begräfning* ("De, som redeliga för sig vandrät hafva")

John Stainer, *I Saw the Lord*

Matthew Martin, *I Saw the Lord*

Lori Laitman, *And I Will Bring Them*

Michael Scherperel, *Et introibunt in speluncas petrarum*

Johannes Sigl, *Refugium II*

Rudolf Tobias, *Des Jona Sendung*

Charles Villiers Stanford, *For Lo, I Raise Up*

Hugo Cole, *Jonah*

Max Stern, *Behold, the Days Come: Cantatas on Biblical Prophecies*

Bob Dylan, *All along the Watchtower*

Miloslav Kabeláč, *Symphony no. 8, op. 54 "Antiphons"* (Text from Daniel)

The Nativity

John La Montaine, *Erode the Greate, a Pageant Opera in 2 Acts*, op. 40

Paul Hindemith, *Das Marienleben*, op. 27

Gabriel Pierné, *Les enfants à Bethléem*

Duke Ellington, [*Three Black Kings*](#)

Mark Smythe, [*Alleluia*](#)

Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

Cristóbal de Morales, Magnificat (Octavi toni)
Orlando di Lassus, Magnificat tertii toni, Magnificat octavi toni
Michael Praetorius, Magnificat per omnes versus super ut re mi fa
sol la
Jehan Titelouze, Magnificat (too many to list!)
Thomas Morley, Thomas Tomkins, Magnificat and Nunc dimittis
(Fifth Service)
Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
(Fauxbourdons)
Nicolas Gombert, Magnificat primi toni
Claudio Merulo, Magnificat primi toni, Magnificat del secondo tono,
Magnificat dell'ottavo tono
Marcin Mielczewski, Magnificat primi toni a 12
Marcin Józef Żebrowski, Magnificat; also Rorate Coeli
Christopher Tye, Magnificat, Nunc dimittis; also *Peccavimus; Omnes
Gentes*; other works
Isfrid Kayser, Magnificat
Robert White, Magnificat
Francois Couperin, Magnificat
Antonio Vivaldi, Magnificat
C. P. E. Bach, Magnificat
J. S. Bach, Magnificat in D Major BWV 243
Ruth Watson Henderson, Magnificat
Sisask Urmas, Magnificat
Einojuhani Rautavaara, Magnificat
Vladimír Godár, Magnificat
Н Богодаева, Величит душа моя Господа (My soul magnifies the
Lord)
John Wood, Magnificat in G
Basil Harwood, Magnificat in A Flat
Wolfram Buchenberg, Magnificat
Joep Franssens, Magnificat
Peter Benoit, Magnificat

James Burton, Magnificat
 Forrest Pierce, Magnificat
 Michael Kurth, Magnificat
 Damijan Mocnik, Magnificat
 Goffredo Petrassi, Magnificat for Soprano, Chorus, and Orchestra
 Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, *A Simple Magnificat*
 Paul Chihara, Magnificat
 Giles Swayne, [Magnificat I](#), op. 33
 Francis Jackson, [Magnificat in G](#)
 Kim André Arnesen, Magnificat
 Sydney Watson, [Service in E: Magnificat](#)
 Matthew Martin, *A Rose Magnificat*
 Charles-Francois Gounod, *An Evening Service*
 Orlando Gibbons, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Second Service; Short Service)
 William Child, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
 Charles Wood, Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in F, “Collegium Regale”
 John Henry Maunder, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in C, D, and G
 John Ireland, Evening Service (Two: in C and F), Benedictus
 Jeremy Filsell, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis from “Windsor Service”
 Richard Pantcheff, Evening Service in D Major, “The Whitchurch Canticles”; St. Paul’s Service; Evening Canticles, “Aedes Christi”
 Julian Anderson, Evening Canticles ([Magnificat](#) and [Nunc Dimittis](#))
 Ben Parry, *Ely Canticles*
 Alastair Borthwick, [Advent Canticles](#)
 Herbert Sumsion, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (in A, D, and Three in G)
 Bernard Rose, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
 Elisabeth Lutyens, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
 Ruth Biggs, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
 Caleb Burhans, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis
 Michael Tippett, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis “Collegium Sancti Johannis Cantabrigiense”
 Ēriks Ešenvalds, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

James Whitbourn, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, “Collegium Regale”; also *Alleluia jubilate*; *There Is No Speech or Language*

David Ashley White, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

Wayne Marshall, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in C Major

Hugh Benham, Evening Service in G Major

John Tavener, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis “Collegium Regale”

Paul Patterson, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, op. 59

Robert J. Powell, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

John Høybye, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

Judith Bingham, *Edington Service*

Philip Wilby, *The Knaresborough Service*

Harold Thalange, *Glasgow Fauxbourdons*

Tim Knight, *Unison Canticles*; *Evening Canticles*; also *Ave Maria*; *Rise Up, My Love*; *Beati Mortui*; *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Naji Hakim, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis

Adrienne Albert, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis

James MacMillan, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis

Peter Klatzow, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, *Cantique de Siméon*

Josquin des Prez, Nunc Dimittis

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Nunc Dimittis

Gustav Holst, Nunc Dimittis

Herbert Howells, Nunc Dimittis

Paweł Łukaszewski, Nunc Dimittis

Peter Tiefenbach, Nunc Dimittis

Hreiðar Ingi, Nunc Dimittis

Sigurður Sævarsson, Nunc Dimittis

Arvo Pärt, Nunc Dimittis

John Ashton Thomas, Nunc Dimittis

Sarah MacDonald, [Nunc Dimittis](#)

Jane Marshall, *Song of Simeon* “Nunc Dimittis”

Christian Forshaw, Nunc Dimittis

Artemy Vedel, *Lord Now Lettest Thou...*

Our Father

Jacobus Gallus (Handl), Pater Noster
Robert Stone, [The Lord's Prayer](#) (earliest setting in English)
Leonhard Paminger, Pater Noster
Gioseffo Zarlino, Pater Noster, Ave Maria
Tomás Luis de Victoria, Pater Noster
Cristóbal de Morales, Pater Noster
Josquin des Prez, Pater Noster
Guillaume de Machaut, Messe de Notre Dame: Pater Noster
Heinrich Schütz, Vater unser, der du bist im Himmel
Herwig Reiter, Vater unser
Nicolai Otto, Pater Noster, Op 33
Albert Hay Malotte, The Lord's Prayer
John Caldwell, The Lord's Prayer
Gabriel Jackson, [The Lord's Prayer](#)
Bernard Rose, The Lord's Prayer
Charles-Francois Gounod, Pater Noster
Joseph Bonnet, Pater Noster, op. 8, no. 1
Franz Liszt, Pater Noster; also Ave Maria; Via Crucis
Ferenc Farkas, Pater Noster
Albert de Klerk, Pater Noster
Giuseppi Verdi, Pater Noster
Maurice Durufle, Notre Pere
John Tavener, The Lord's Prayer; Notre Pere
Ernst Krenek, 5 Prayers, op. 97
Felicia Donceanu, *Rugăciunea Domnească*
John Ireland, Communion Service in C Major: Pater Noster (in English)
Leonard Bernstein, Mass: The Lord's Prayer
Thomas Bloch, *Missa Cantate*: Pater Noster
Alan Hovhaness, The Lord's Prayer, Op 35
Andrejs Jurjāns, The Lord's Prayer
Arvo Pärt, Vater unser
Günter Raphael, "Vater unser" Choralkantate op. 58; also Psalm 27

“Der Herr ist mein Licht”; Psalm 104 “Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele” op. 29; Psalm 126 op. 56 Nr. 1; Aus den Klageliedern Jeremias op. 56 Nr. 2; Kor, op. 63
 Pekka Kostiainen, Pater Noster
 Michael Bojesen, Pater Noster
 Dan Locklair, Pater Noster
 Arnold Strals (recorded by Sister Janet Mead), *The Lord’s Prayer*
 Marcin Gumiela, Pater Noster
 Naji Hakim, Pater Noster
 Leoš Jánáček, Otce nas (The Lord’s Prayer), JW IV/29
 Igor Stravinsky, Otche Nash
 Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Lord’s Prayer
 Valentin Silvestrov, Otche Nash (from Diptych)
 Apostol Nikolaev-Stroumsky, Отче nášъ (Otche Nash)
 Nicolai Kedrov, Отче nášъ (Otche Nash)
 Peter Dinev, Отче nášъ (Otche Nash)
 Dobri Khristov, Otche Nash no. 2
 Alfred Schnittke, 3 Sacred Hymns, no. 3. Otche nash
 D. Ljubojevic, Oče naš
 Minta Aleksinački, Oče naš (Lord’s Prayer); also Psalm 139
 Dimitri Tchesnokov, Pater Noster
 Richard Einhorn, *Voices of Light*: Pater Noster (with film)
 Einojuhani Rautavaara, Herran rukous (The Lord’s Prayer)
 Peter Maxwell Davies, The Lord’s Prayer
 Toby Young, The Lord’s Prayer
 Michael G. Cunningham, The Lord’s Prayer, op. 6d
 Hugh Benham, The Lord’s Prayer
 Daron Hagen, “Our Father” (Second Movement of *Little Prayers*)
 Frode Fjellheim, Pater Noster
 Rebecca Lundberg, [Pater Noster](#)
 Anúna (Michael McGlynn), Pater Noster

The Life and Death of Jesus

Philip Stopford, [Hosanna to the Son of David](#)

C. P. E. Bach, 30 Geistliche Gesänge mit Melodien, Book 2, Wq. 198, H. 752: no. 29; *Jesus in Gethsemane*

Michael Berkeley, *Gethsemane Fragment* (instrumental)

Hjalmar Borgström, *Jesus in Gethsemane*, op. 14 (instrumental)

Volker David Kirchner, *Gethsemani*; also *Schibboleth*

Teizo Matsumura, *To the Night of Gethsemane* (instrumental)

Bert Breit, *Meditationen*

Simon Vincent, *Meditations on Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*;
Stations of the Cross

Gottfried August Homilius, *So gehst du nun* (St. Mark Passion)

Charles Wood, *St. Mark Passion*

Reinhard Keiser, *Markuspassion*

Kurt Thomas, *Passionmusik nach den Evangelisten Markus*, op. 7

Adolf Brunner, *Passionsgeschichte nach dem Evangelisten Markus*

Lorenzo Perosi, *La passione di Cristo secondo San Marco*; *Le 7 Parole di N.S. Gesù Cristo sulla Croce*; also *La Trasfigurazione di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*; *Tu es Petrus*; *O Padre nostro*

Osvaldo Golijov, *St. Mark Passion*

Théodore Dubois, *Seven Last Words of Christ*

Patrick Burgan, *Seven Last Words of Christ*

Daniel Pinkham, *Saint Mark Passion*; *The Last Seven Words of Christ*

Paul Carr, *Seven Last Words from the Cross*

Knut Nystedt, *Jesu sieben Worte*, op. 171

Enjott Schneider, *Sieben letzte Worte Jesu*; also *Organ Concerto no. 2: Hiob*; *Three Biblical Stories*; *Crucifixus*; *Salome*; others

Johannes Heroldt, *Historia Des Leidens Und Sterbens Unsers Herrn Und Heilands Jesu Christi aus dem H. Evangelisten Mattheo mit sechs Stimmen*/p>

Johann Heinrich Rolle, *St. Matthew Passion*

Philip Wilby, *An English Passion according to Saint Matthew*

[Norbert Rousseau](#), *Mattheuspassie*

Hans Peter Türk, *Siebenbürgische Passionmusik*

Georg Philipp Telemann, Lukas Passion 1728; Der Tod Jesu
 Heinrich Schütz, Lukas-Passion, Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross
 Otto Malling, [Der Tod und die Auferstehung Christi, op. 54](#); [Die sieben Worte des Erlösers am Kreuze, op. 81](#); [Aus dem Leben Christi, op. 63](#); Die Geburt Christi, op. 48; Die heilige Jungfrau, op. 70; [Die heiligen drei Könige, op. 84](#); Paulus, op. 78; Nachklänge aus Davids Psalmen, op. 89
 Rudolf Mauersberger, Passionsmusik nach dem Lukasevangelium
 Calliope Tsoupaki, St. Luke's Passion
 Kjell-Mork Karlsen, St. Luke Passion; St. John Passion; Markuspasjon; Orthodox St. Matthew Passion
 Teodoro Clinio, Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Joannem
 Johann Friedrich Fasch, Passio Jesu Christi
 Sofia Gubaidulina, Johannes-Passion and Johannes-Ostern
 Guido Mancusi, Johannespassion
 Frédéric Ledroit, La Passion du Christ selon Saint Jean
 Carl Heinrich Graun, Der Tod Jesu
 Hugo Distler, Choral-Passion, op. 7
 Johann Wilhelm Hertel, Der Sterbende Heiland
 Robert Kyr, *The Passion according to 4 Evangelists*
 Peter Breiner, *The Story* (Oratorio)
 Hermann Reutter, *Die Passion in 9 Inventionen*, op. 25
 Bohuslav Martinu, *Greek Passion*
 Tan Dun, *Water Passion*
 Torbjorn Dyrud, *Out of Darkness*
 Adolphus Hailstork, *Crucifixion*
 Frank Martin, *Golgotha*; *Polyptyque, Six images de la Passion du Christ*
 Richard Danielpour, *The Passion of Yeshua*
 Anton Schweitzer, *Die Auferstehung Christi*
 John Ireland, *Greater Love Hath No Man*
 Francis Poulenc, *Tenebrae factae sunt*
 Harrison Birtwistle, *The Last Supper*

Patrick Hadley, *A Lenten Cantata*
 Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Страсна седмица (Strasna sedmica =
 Passion Week)
 Franz Haydn, *Seven Last Words of Our Redeemer on the Cross*
 Michael Finnissey, *Dum transisset Sabbatum*
 Judith Bingham, *Jesum quaeritis Nazarenum*; also “Prelude and
 Voluntary” (inspired by the Emmaus Road story)
 Carman Moore, [Gethsemane Park](#)
 Arvo Pärt, *The Woman with the Alabaster Box*; *Tribute to Caesar*
 Alessandro Stradella, *San Giovanni Battista*
 Helge Burggrave, *Jehoschua* (Rotes Oratorium)
 Martin Emslie, *Omega and Alpha*
 Thomas Tallis, *If Ye Love Me*
 Paul Mealor, *If Ye Love Me*; also *Ave Maria*; *De Profundis*; *Jubilate*
Deo; *The Beatitudes*; *The Lord Bless You and Keep You*; *The Selwyn*
Service; *All Wisdom Cometh from the Lord*
 Benjamin Britten, *Cantata misericordium*, op. 69
 Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus* (as well
 the original folk song)
 Hugo Alfvén, *Den forlorade sonen* (The Prodigal Son) Suite
 Keith Green, *Prodigal Son Suite*, *Road to Jericho*, *The Sheep and the*
Goats
 Kurt Atterberg, *De Favitska Jungfrurna*, op. 17 “The Wise and Foolish
 Virgins”
 Jazeps Vitols, *Jezus pie akas* (Jesus by the Well)
 Bruce Springsteen, *Jesus Was an Only Son*
 Christopher Wright, *The Bread of Life*; *Hymn of Salvation*; also
Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis; *Song of Praise*
 E. J. Moeran, *Blessed Are Those Servants*
 Philip Stopford, *In My Father’s House*; also *Ave Maria*
 Vladimir Ivanovich Martynov, *The Beatitudes*
 Damijan Mocnik, *Blagri* (Beatitudes)
 Zoltan Kodaly, *Jezus es a Kufarok*
 John Stainer, [God So Loved the World](#)
 Will Todd, *God So Loved the World*; *Passion Music*

Francis Pott, *Christus*
Arthur Bliss, *Mary of Magdala*
Patrick Burgan, *Noli me tangere*
Graham Ross, *Ascendo ad Patrem meum*
Mason Bates, “Sirens” (5th movement, from the Book of Matthew)
Omerror Dawson (Arr. Mervyn Warren), *Come unto Me*
James Lee III, *Stones and Bread*
Einojuhani Rautavaara, *Kiusaukset*
Alemdar Karamanov, Cycle of Symphonies 11-14 “Accomplished” (and many others)

Others

Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, *Oratorium nach den Bildern der Bibel*
Antonín Dvořák, *Biblical Songs*
David Monrad Johansen, *Fem Bibelske Sanger*, op. 25
Johan Kvandal, 3 Solokantater for sang og orgel
[Charles Tournemire, Symphony no. 6, op. 48, “Bible”](#)
Anthony Milner, *The Water and the Fire*
Margaret Allison Bonds, *Scripture Reading*
Einojuhani Rautavaara, *Vigilia*
James Lentini, *Three Sacred Meditations*
Johan Franco, *Seven Biblical Sketches*
Bruno Bjelinski, *Drei biblische Legenden* (for Trumpet and Piano)
Dave Brubeck, *The Commandments*; [The Gates of Justice](#)
Kåre Kolberg, *Hakenáanit* (The Canaanite Woman)
[Robert White, Lamentations a 5](#)
Edward Bairstow, *The Lamentation*
Ernst Krenek, *Lamentatio Jeremiæ Prophetæ*, op. 93
Peter-Anthony Togni, *Lamentatio Jeremiæ Prophetæ*
Pablo Casals, *O vos omnes*
Rene Clausen, *O vos omnes*
G. F. Handel, *Belshazzar*, HWV 61; *Judas Maccabeus*
Jean Sibelius, [Belshazzar’s Feast](#)(*Belsazars gastabud*), op. 5

William Walton, *Belshazzar's Feast*
 Giuseppe Verdi, *Nabucco*
 John Knowles Paine, *St. Peter*, op. 20
 Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Paulus*
 George Dyson, *St. Paul's Voyage to Melita*
 Jan A. P. Kaczmarek, *Paul, Apostle of Christ*
 Naji Hakim, *Saul de Tarse* (Oratorio)
 Egil Hovland, *Saul*, op. 74
 Sulo Salonen, 22 evankelimotettia; *Ala pelkaa, Maria; Frukta icke, Maria*
 Jacobus Vaet, *Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus*
 Joseph Samson, *Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus*
 Paul Creston, *Corinthians XIII*
 Vincent Persichetti, *Love*
 Richard Rodney Bennett, *These Three*
 Joni Mitchell, *Love*
 Andreas Raselius, *Stephanus*
 Harvey Schmidt, *Philemon*
 Harold Thalange, *All These Died in Faith*
 Kurt Weill, *The Eternal Road*
 Jacob Druckman, *Vox Humana*
 Antonio Caldara, *Motets*
 Sylvie Bodorová, *Juda Maccabeus*
 Patrick Gowers, *Viri Galilaei*
 Gabriel Jackson, *In All His Works*
 Ralph Vaughan Williams, "[O Man Greatly Beloved](#)" from [Dona Nobis Pacem](#); *Sancta Civitas; Benedicite*
 Anton Bruckner, *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus*
 Edward Elgar, *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus; The Apostles; The Kingdom*
Let Us Now Praise Famous Men—versions by Edmund Rubbra,
 Roberta Bitgood, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gerald Finzi
 Anthony Pitts, *Seven Letters*
 Herbert Howells, *Blessed Are the Dead*
 James Whitbourn, *He Carried Me Away in the Spirit; Pure River of Water of Life*

Daniel Pinkham, *Revelation Motets*
 Pierre Henry, *L'apocalypse de Jean*
 Marcin Gumiela, *Apocalypse*
 Knut Nystedt, *Apocalypsis Joannis*, op. 155
 Kjell-Mork Karlsen, *Apenbarings-Meditasjoner* (Meditations on Revelation), op. 155
 Boris Arapov, [Revelation of St. John the Theologian](#)
 Poul Ruders, *Thus Saw Saint John*
 Edgar Bainton, *And I Saw a New Heaven*
 Julian Wachner, *Behold the Tabernacle of God*
 Patrick Hawes, *Revelation*
 Cristian Bence-Muk, *Apocalipsa*
 Reginald Haber, *Holy, Holy, Holy*
 Paulin Michael Mills, *Thou Art Worthy*
 Adrian Howard and Pat Turner, *Salvation Belongs to Our God*
 Simon Khorolskiy, [Знамение Сына](#) (The Sign of the Son)
 Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *David et Jonathas* H.490
 Giedrius Kuprevicius, *David's Lamentation from Chamber Symphony "Star of David"*
 Philip W. J. Stopford, *Magnificat in A Major*
 Klement Slavický: *Psalmi*
 Frederic Ledroit, *La Passion du Christ*
 Deborah Pritchard, *New College Service; Light of the World; Gethsemane*
 Krzysztof Penderecki, *Symphony No.7 "Seven Gates of Jerusalem"*
 Walter Braunfels, *Offenbarung Johannis*
 Jaroslav Krček, *Z kamení chléb* (From Stones to Bread)
 Martin Smolka, *Laudate, angeli; The Name Emmanuel; Sacred Vessel; Psalmus 114*
 Stephen Dankner, *Biblical Songs* (1998) for soprano and piano
 Staffan Storm, *Qualities of Darkness*
 G. F. Handel, *Dixit Dominus*
 The list could go on...

General Bibliography

Suggestions for further reading can be found at the end of almost every chapter. Other works of general relevance to the theme of the book as a whole, as well as books drawn on and referred to in more than one chapter, are included here.

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