

*Point and Counterpoint —
Resistance and Submission:
Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Theology and Music
in Times of War and Social Crisis*

Andreas Pangritz

Introduction

From its beginning Christian theology has been conceived in close relationship to music. Theological dogmatics describing the content of Christian faith was originally rooted in “doxology” — the glorification of God’s glory (*doxa*), the human answer in praise and mourning to God’s word. Only later the meaning of dogmatics changed, emphasizing primarily the aspect of doctrine — authoritative teaching of the church rather than revolutionary singing of the “dogma.”

There are theological thinkers who in their dogmatic work express the relationship between theology and music, dogma and doxology more than others. It follows therefore to ask if in their case musical allusions can be taken seriously as parables interpreting the theological content of the texts as well. The example of Karl Barth is well known. Barth’s predilection for Mozart’s music sheds light on central concepts of his *Church Dogmatics*.¹ Another example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a theologian of Lutheran descent he was familiar with Luther’s conviction that music deserved the first position after theol-

1. Cf. Andreas Pangritz, “‘Freie Zuneigung’: Über Karl Barths Verhältnis zu Mozart,” in Ute Gniewoß et al., eds., *Störenfriedels Zeddelkasten: Geschenkpapiere zum 60. Geburtstag von Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt* (1988) (Berlin: Alektor, 1991), pp. 178-202.

ogy. According to Luther music, as God's gift, was invoked to chase the devil away.²

Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*³ contain a series of musical reflections that seem to have crucial significance for his latest theological thinking. Most of these allusions appear in letters prior to the formulation of the theological theme – the question as to “what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.”⁴ Reflections on music prepare for and interpret Bonhoeffer's latest theological thinking and can thus be of help in understanding the revolutionary “new formulas.” Finally, Bonhoeffer employs the musical formula of “polyphony of life” to describe the contrapuntal interplay between spiritual and secular love as the essence of nonreligious Christianity:

What I mean is that God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts – not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes . . . is earthly affection. Even in the Bible we have the Song of Songs. . . . Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are “undivided and yet distinct,” in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of polyphony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*?⁵

2. Martin Luther, “*Peri tēs mousikēs*” (1530), in WA 30, no. 2, p. 696. Luther's musical advisor Johann Walther even believed that music was wrapped up and hidden in theology (cf. Oskar Söhngen, *Theologie der Musik* [Kassel: Johannes Stauda, 1967], p. 81).

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, ed. Chr. Gremmels et al. (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998) (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke [DBW], vol. 8).

4. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 30 April 1944, p. 279.

5. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 20 May 1944, p. 303. Cf. the letters to Eberhard Bethge, 21 May 1944: “The image of polyphony is still pursuing me . . .,” p. 305; 29 May 1944, p. 311.

Heinrich Schütz and the “Restoration of all Things”

A great deal of Bonhoeffer’s musical allusions in *Letters and Papers from Prison* refer to Heinrich Schütz, the “father of German music” in the seventeenth century. Bonhoeffer had become acquainted with Schütz’s music through Eberhard Bethge during the Finkenwalde period. On 4 February 1941 he thanked Bethge in a letter from Ettal monastery for a birthday gift, Hans Joachim Moser’s biography of Heinrich Schütz: “I owe Heinrich Schütz to you, and with him a whole rich world. I would like to accompany you singing ‘Make haste, O God, to deliver me . . .’, which — by the help of the attached notes — I hummed away to myself. It is not by chance that it was you, by whom Schütz has approached me.”⁶

It is likely that the relevance of Schütz’s *Kleine Geistliche Konzerte*, which Bethge, Bonhoeffer, and many others felt especially during World War II, refers to a correspondence of situations. Schütz had composed these settings during the Thirty Years War in Germany (1618-1648). Written for small ensembles, these concerts formed Schütz’s musical protest against the war and its consequences. As Schütz writes in the dedication of the first volume of his *Kleine Geistliche Konzerte* (1636): “It is obvious for many observers, in which way the laudable music among other liberal arts has severely declined and at some places even been destroyed by the ongoing dangerous events of war in our beloved Fatherland of German nation.” Or in the dedication of the second volume (1639):

I am ashamed to appear in the face of His Serenity with such small and simple works. But the wickedness of the present times is unfavourable for the liberal arts and does not permit my other works, which I have at hand without any glory, to appear in public. At the moment there was no other choice, therefore, than this poor work. But should the arts, which have nearly been suffocated and trodden into the mud by the arms now, be elevated again to their former dignity and value by the mercy of God, I will not forget to appear

6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Konspiration und Haft 1940-1945*, ed. J. Glenthøj et al. (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996) (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 16), p. 129.

according to my duty in the face of His Princely Serenity with a richer pledge.⁷

In *Letters and Papers from Prison* these concerts are meaningful for Bonhoeffer, especially through the close relationship between music and (mostly biblical) text. More than once Bonhoeffer mentions Psalm 70 (“Make haste, O God, to deliver me”) in Schütz’s setting.⁸ Other compositions by Schütz, mentioned by Bonhoeffer, are the settings of Psalms 3:6-9; 27:4; and 47.⁹

This selection of texts from the book of Psalms permits an insight into Bonhoeffer’s spiritual life as a prisoner, reflected in the “Prayerbook of the Bible.”¹⁰ We listen to him praying for help against his enemies (Psalms 3 and 70) and expressing his hope that God might show himself as “frightening” to the “Gentiles,” and that he might elect “the glory of Jacob, whom he loves” (Psalm 47).¹¹

7. Heinrich Schütz’s dedications quoted from Wilhelm Ehmman, “Vorwort,” in Heinrich Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, vol. 10 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963), p. vii (my translation).

8. Cf. Schütz, “Eile mich, Gott, zu erretten . . .” (Schütz-Werke-Verzeichnis [SWV] 282), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 10, *Erster Theil Kleiner Geistlicher Concerten*, No. 1, pp. 1ff.; mentioned by Bonhoeffer four times: Letters to his parents, 15 May 1943 (*Letters*, p. 40); to Eberhard Bethge, 20 November 1943 (*Letters*, p. 134); Advent IV 1943 (*Letters*, p. 171); and 21 May 1944 (*Letters*, p. 306 [cf. DBW 8, p. 446, note 23]).

9. Cf. the compositions “Ich liege und schlafe . . .” (SWV 310), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 10, *Anderer Theil Kleiner Geistlichen Concerten*, No. 5, pp. 96ff.; mentioned by Bonhoeffer in the letter to his parents, 15 May 1943 (*Letters*, p. 40), and in the letter to Eberhard Bethge, 21 May 1944 (*Letters*, p. 306 [cf. DBW 8, p. 446, note 23]); “Eins bitte ich von dem Herren . . .” (SWV 294), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 10, *Erster Theil*, No. 13, pp. 100ff.; mentioned by Bonhoeffer in the letter to Eberhard Bethge, Advent IV 1943 (*Letters*, p. 171); and “Frohlocket mit Händen . . .” (SWV 349), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 15: *Symphoniae Sacrae Secunda Pars*, pp. 82ff.; mentioned by Bonhoeffer in the letter to his parents, 15 May 1943 (*Letters*, p. 40), and in the letters to Eberhard Bethge, 20 November 1943 (*Letters*, p. 134), and 21 May 1944 (*Letters*, p. 306 [cf. DBW 8, p. 446, note 23]).

10. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Das Gebetbuch der Bibel: Eine Einführung in die Psalmen* (1940), ed. G. L. Müller (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1987 [DBW 5]).

11. Especially the text of the concert “Make haste, O God, to deliver me” (Psalm 70) seems to be meaningful regarding Bonhoeffer’s situation as a prisoner. “Make haste, O God, to deliver me; to help me, O Lord./Let them be ashamed and confounded, that seek after my soul;/let them be turned backward and put to confusion,

Bonhoeffer cannot read these Psalms any longer without hearing them in the settings by Heinrich Schütz,¹² where the Word of God is expressed, interpreted, and intensified through musical “figures.” Some examples: in the setting of Psalm 3 the line “I laid me down and slept,” descending to the extreme depth and contrasted by rapidly ascending melodic leaps on “I awakened”; in the same setting the fiercely dentated melodic figure on “thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly”; in Psalm 70 the threefold repetition of the derisive “Aha, Aha” of the enemies; and in the same setting the expressive ascension of the melodic line to the most extreme altitude on “O Lord, make no tarrying.” Remarkable as well is the artificial setting of the “Selah,” mysterious in its meaning, in the settings of Psalms 3 and 47.

In one of the letters to Eberhard Bethge, on Advent IV 1943, Bonhoeffer cites from his memory not only the text but also the notes of a “Geistliches Konzert.” In this case the text is not a biblical Psalm, but a hymn on Christ by St. Augustine: “O sweet, o kindly,/O good Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³ Bonhoeffer cites the ascending melodic figure of seven notes on occasion of the exclamation “o,” languishing for union with Christ, in the line “o how my soul longs for you.” In Schütz’s setting the melismatic figure on “o” is repeated four times, each time a fifth higher (*e flat–b flat, b flat–f, f–c, c–g*), so that the musical expression is intensified in an extraordinary measure. Moser underscores the fact that by means of transposed repetition of the melismatic motif, the “ecstatic cry of longing” forms the “center and climax” of the composition. In addition he points out that there is a certain affinity between this figure and the melismatic “o” in Schütz’s motet on the Song of Songs: “O, quam tu pulchra es. . .”¹⁴ And it is true that the language of

that desire my hurt./Let them be turned back for a reward of their shame, that say ‘Aha, Aha’,/Let those who seek thee and love thy salvation rejoice and be glad./and say always: Praise God on high!/But I am poor and needy;/make haste unto me, O God:/thou art my help and deliverer./O Lord, make no tarrying.”

12. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 40.

13. Cf. Heinrich Schütz, “O süßer, o freundlicher, o gütiger Herr Jesu Christe . . .” (SWV 285), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 10, *Erster Theil . . .*, No. 4, pp. 83ff.

14. Cf. Hans Joachim Moser, *Heinrich Schütz: Sein Leben und Werk* (1936), 2nd ed. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1954), pp. 436f. Cf. Heinrich Schütz, “O quam tu pulchra es, amica mea/Veni de Libano, amica mea” (double motet; SWV 265/66), in Schütz, *Neue Ausgabe*, vol. 13, *Symphoniae Sacrae*, pp. 72ff.

the Augustinian hymn is colored by erotic associations, when it continues, “My helper, you have ensnared my heart/With your love,/That I yearn for you without end. . . .”

In a formulation resembling Moser’s phrasing, Bonhoeffer comments that he now and then thinks of the “o” from the Augustinian hymn “O bone Jesu” in Schütz’s setting. “Doesn’t this passage in its ecstatic longing combined with pure devotion, suggest the ‘bringing back’ of all earthly desire?”¹⁵ It seems that here Bonhoeffer’s Christological interest has already found its full intensity and intimacy in musical concepts before the essential theological question, “who Christ really is, for us today,”¹⁶ appears in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In close connection with the hymn “O bone Jesu” Bonhoeffer quotes also the Paul Gerhardt¹⁷ hymn “Beside thy cradle here I stand,” which he characterizes by “a slight flavor of the monastery and mysticism,” mentioning also the “Imitation of Christ” by Thomas à Kempis.¹⁸ Thus it seems legitimate even to speak of a tendency to mysticism in connection with Christ in this context.

It is important to realize on the other hand that Bonhoeffer, after having mentioned the ecstatic “o” in Schütz’s setting, continues quite soberly: “‘Bringing back’ mustn’t, of course, be confused with ‘sublimation’”¹⁹ “Bringing back” or “recapitulation” (*anakephalaiōsis*), the restoration of all things, is the theme of the whole paragraph we are dealing with.

The immediate cause of Bonhoeffer’s chain of thought is another verse by Paul Gerhardt — the fifth stanza of the Christmas hymn “All my heart this night rejoices . . . (Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen . . .).” Bonhoeffer writes that “For this last week or so these lines have kept on running through my head: ‘Brethren, from all ills that grieve you/You are freed; All you need/I will surely give you (= bring back to you).’ What does this ‘I’ll bring back’ mean? It means that nothing is lost, that everything is in good hands, kept safe in Christ, although it is transformed, made transparent, clear, and free from all selfish de-

15. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 170. Translation altered.

16. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 30 April 1944, p. 179.

17. The famous Lutheran theologian and poet of the seventeenth century.

18. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 170.

19. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 170. Translation altered.

sire.”²⁰ Bonhoeffer alludes here to the doctrine of recapitulation or restoration of all things by the anti-Gnostic church father Irenaeus (second century), characterizing it as “a magnificent conception, full of comfort.”²¹ Referring to the biblical roots of the doctrine in Ecclesiastes 3:15 (“God seeks again what is past”), it seems to Bonhoeffer that this doctrine is the appropriate answer to our “longing for the past,” which may seize us “when we least expect it.”²² It is Bonhoeffer’s own experience that “nothing tortures us more than longing,” and during the months in prison he was sometimes terribly homesick.²³

Bonhoeffer would not be satisfied by any substitute for what he had lost and was longing for:

Substitutes repel us; we simply have to wait and wait; we have to suffer unspeakably from the separation, and feel the longing till it almost makes us ill. That is the only way, although it is a very painful one, in which we can preserve unimpaired our relationship with our loved ones. . . . There is nothing worse in such times than to try to find a substitute for the irreplaceable.²⁴

Bonhoeffer seeks instead to find “the strength to overcome the tension” in “full concentration on the cause of longing,” and he is convinced that Christ will “restore all this as God originally intended it to be, without the distortion resulting from our sins.”²⁵

Obviously Bonhoeffer understands Irenaeus’s doctrine of recapitulation in its anti-Gnostic historical or rather eschatological perspective as restoration or bringing back of all things by Christ in the moment when he descends from heaven to earth. Only in this understanding of recapitulation does the musical allusion to the ecstatic “o” in Schütz’s setting make sense.

20. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, Advent IV 1943, pp. 169-70. Translation of Paul Gerhardt altered.

21. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 170. Cf. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses* I.10.1: Christ will come back from the heavens in the glory of the Father “in order to restore everything (*epi tò anakephalaiósthai tà pánta*)” and to resurrect the flesh of the whole humanity.

22. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 18 December 1943, p. 169.

23. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 167.

24. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 167.

25. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, pp. 168-70. Translation altered.

On the Theological Status of Music

The close relationship between music and word, as demonstrated in Schütz's settings, has yet another consequence in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Music achieves an unexpected freedom just by its foundation in the word of Christ. In this context Bonhoeffer is ready even to introduce an important correction concerning the doctrine of the mandates in his *Ethics*. As he writes in his letter to Renate and Eberhard Bethge, 23 January 1944: "Who is there, for instance, in our times, who can devote himself with an easy mind to music, friendship, games, or happiness? Surely not the 'ethical' person, but only the Christian."²⁶ What is the meaning of this phrasing?

In an insertion probably made in 1941 to the chapter "Christ, Reality and Good (Christ, the Church and the World)" of his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer had described the relatedness of the world to Christ in the four concrete "mandates: labor, marriage, government, and the church."²⁷ In this context, music, as a "creation of Cain," had been counted among the various aspects of the mandate of labor.²⁸ In the recently mentioned letter from prison (January 1944) Bonhoeffer counts music, together with friendship (the letter's primary concern), among the various aspects of culture and education. But now he does not want to classify culture and education any longer under labor, "however tempting that might be in many ways." Still, he insists that "marriage, work, state, and church all have their definite, divine mandate,"²⁹ but in contrast to *Ethics* he introduces a "broad area of free play, which surrounds" the "sphere of obedience" regulated by the mandates.³⁰ Full

26. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 193. Translation altered.

27. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan/Collier Books, 1986), p. 207.

28. Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 209: "The first creation of Cain was the city, the earthly counterpart of the city of God. There follows the invention of the fiddles and flutes, which afford to us on earth a foretaste of the music of heaven. . . . Through the divine mandate of labour there is to come into being a world which, knowingly or not, is waiting for Christ, is designed for Christ, is open to Christ, serves Him and glorifies Him."

29. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 192.

30. The usual translation of "*Spielraum der Freiheit*" by "sphere of freedom" does not cover the aspect of "play" in the German term *Spielraum*.

humanity, according to Bonhoeffer's new insight, embraces more than the four mandates: "Our 'Protestant' (not Lutheran) Prussian world has been so dominated by the four mandates that the sphere of free play has receded into the background." Now music is regarded as belonging to the sphere of free play, which "must be confidently defended against all the disapproving frowns of 'ethical' existences, though without claiming for it the *necessitas* of a divine decree, but only the *necessitas* of *freedom*."³¹ But exactly in this necessity of freedom music forms – like friendship – a necessary aspect of full humanity, something "*sui generis*," belonging to the mandates "as the cornflower belongs to the cornfield."³²

The new theological status of music, belonging to the sphere of free play rather than to the mandate of labor, has consequences with respect to the relationship between music and word. In the settings by Schütz the art of music has to serve the word of Christ, which according to Bonhoeffer's earlier view bestows music with ethical dignity as an aspect of the mandate of culture or labor. As an aspect of the sphere of free play, surrounding the ethical sphere, music (together with other aspects of culture and education) gains a new freedom with respect to the word. In its aesthetic autonomy it can be regarded as justified, even if the free play does not simply "serve" the word.

The Art of Fugue and the Conspiracy

The new theological concept of music seems to recur one month later, when Bonhoeffer, in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, refers to *The Art of Fugue* by Johann Sebastian Bach: "For really, there are some fragments . . . whose importance lasts for centuries, because their completion can only be a matter for God, and so they are fragments that must be frag-

31. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 193. Translation altered. Still, it seems to be uncertain as to which way Bonhoeffer will ground this "sphere of freedom" in Christology. Thus after "freedom" he adds in parenthesis "of the Christian . . . !?" In some respect the "sphere of free play" seems to be connected with the mandate of the church particularly. On the other hand the "sphere of free play" surrounds the whole "world of mandates." It is obvious that Bonhoeffer's thinking here is in experimental flux.

32. The image of cornflower and cornfield will reappear in Bonhoeffer's poem "The Friend" (*Letters*, pp. 388-91).

ments — I'm thinking, e.g., of the *Art of Fugue*.”³³ Bonhoeffer sees the fragmentariness of *The Art of Fugue* in analogy to the social situation of his generation: “The longer we are uprooted from our professional activities and our private lives, the more we feel how fragmentary our lives are, compared with those of our parents.”³⁴ According to Bonhoeffer the times of the polyhistor or polymath, even the times of the specialist have gone, and “our cultural life remains a torso. The important thing today is that we should be able to discern from the fragment of our life how the whole was arranged and planned, and what material it consists of.”³⁵

Speaking of fragmentariness Bonhoeffer does not refer to the fragment as genre, praised by some romantic theories of art in contrast to the classical ideal of perfection. Bonhoeffer speaks of the lives of a whole generation, which have, by the pressure of outward events, been “split . . . into fragments, like bombs falling on houses.”³⁶ The reference to Jeremiah 45, following the reflection on the correspondence between *The Art of Fugue* and “the fragmentariness of our lives,” is telling in this context. “I can never get away from Jeremiah 45,” writes Bonhoeffer. “Here, too, is a necessary fragment of life — ‘but I will give you your life as a prize of war’.”³⁷

It is a matter of fact that Bach's *Art of Fugue* remained uncompleted.³⁸ On the other hand, *The Art of Fugue* is, in its scientific construction, an exemplary masterpiece of the times of the polymath. Bach's music, and particularly his later speculative works, claimed to be

33. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 23 February 1944, p. 219. Together with Bonhoeffer Bethge had bought the edition *Die Kunst der Fuge*, für zwei Klaviere gesetzt von Erich Schwesb, nach der Neuordnung von Wolfgang Graeser (Wolfenbüttel and Berlin, 1937). Now and then they had tried to play together single movements of the work (cf. E. Bethge, letter to the author of this essay, 12 August 1984).

34. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 219. Cf. Bonhoeffer's letter to his parents only three days earlier: “Our generation cannot now lay claim to such a life as was possible in yours. . . . But this fragmentariness may, in fact, point towards a fulfilment beyond the limits of human achievement . . .” (p. 215).

35. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 219.

36. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 215.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 219.

38. At the end of the manuscript, where the “Fuga a 3 soggetti” breaks off, we find the following entry by the hand of Carl Ph. E. Bach: “Over this Fugue, where the name BACH is used in the countersubject, the author died.”

expressions of musical erudition comparable with scientific scholarship. One may hesitate, therefore, to compare the fragmentary character of *The Art of Fugue* with such forced “fragments of life” as Bonhoeffer observes them in Jeremiah and in the lives of his own generation. The fact, however, should be taken into account that the time of Bach’s life was not free from social conflicts either. On the contrary, it was characterized by a severe crisis of the culture of the Reformation, reflected in Bach’s musical language. Theodor W. Adorno regarded Bach as a “genius of remembering.” The archaic traits, particularly in Bach’s later works, indicated the resistance to the beginning commercialization of music, “which together with the increasing subjectivism inevitably was carried through” in his times, until music assumed the “character of merchandise” like everything else.³⁹ In other words, *The Art of Fugue* forms a stumbling block rather than representing the musical style of the time, a *pièce de résistance* against the growing influence of capitalism in musical culture. Thus, it is not only by chance that this work remained uncompleted. Bach was regarded as conservative in *The Art of Fugue* particularly. But precisely this retirement into stylistic isolation can be interpreted as a protest against the enlightened absolutism of the princes who, in Bach’s view, alongside with their support of the “gallant style” in music, betrayed the original intentions of the Reformation. In some respect the social isolation of the later Bach can be compared with the isolation of contemporary music in Germany already before the time of National Socialism.⁴⁰

Historically, then, Bonhoeffer’s comparison between the situation of his generation and the fragmentariness of *The Art of Fugue* makes sense. Theologically, *The Art of Fugue* seems to him to be relevant to the present situation of war because of its fragmentariness especially. For “If our life is but the remotest reflection of such a frag-

39. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt” (Bach defended against his admirers; 1951), in Theodor W. Adorno, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I: Prismen. Ohne Leitbild*, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 10/1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 142 and 146.

40. Concerning the fragmentary character of Schoenberg’s and Berg’s operas Adorno suggested accordingly that “in the present situation every important product in art and philosophy was condemned to fragmentariness” (Theodor W. Adorno, *Dissonanzen: Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 14 [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973], p. 260).

ment, if we accumulate, at least for a short time, a wealth of themes and weld them into a harmony in which the great counterpoint is maintained from start to finish, so that at last, when it breaks off abruptly, we can sing no more than the chorale, 'I come before thy throne', we will not bemoan the fragmentariness of our lives, but rather rejoice in it."⁴¹

Only two days earlier Bonhoeffer had thought about the "boundaries between necessary resistance to 'fate', and equally necessary 'submission'."⁴² He had come to the conclusion that "we must confront fate . . . as resolutely as we submit to it at the right time. One can speak of 'guidance' only on the other side of that twofold process, with God meeting us no longer as 'Thou', but also 'disguised' in the 'It'; so in the last resort my question is how we are to find the 'Thou' in this 'it' (i.e. fate), or, in other words, how does 'fate' really become 'guidance'?"⁴³ — a guidance, in which God himself takes on the resistance already given up by human beings. With this reflection in mind every false appeasement by the entry of the final chorale is excluded; rather, that chorale underlines once more the irreconcilability with the powers of death, pointing towards the God of life who, on the other side of the human turn from "penultimate" resistance into "ultimate" submission, takes on his own resistance against death.

The historical question, how it happened that *The Art of Fugue* was handed down with the chorale as a conclusion, is not part of Bonhoeffer's interest.⁴⁴ For him the theological perspective is decisive. If on the other side of the silence enforced by the violence of death "we can sing no more than the chorale,"⁴⁵ then this singing may serve as an

41. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 219.

42. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 21 February 1944, p. 217. Translation altered.

43. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 217.

44. According to the edition by E. Schwebsch, used by Bonhoeffer and Bethge, the chorale does not belong to the original work, although it is tolerated as a concluding gesture of reconciliation: "Without any external connection with the 'Art of Fugue', even in a different tune, a voice is heard, expressing humbly what should have been pronounced in metaphysical greatness by the final harmony of this work or rather of the life's work: 'I come before thy throne'" (E. Schwebsch, *Vorwort*; cited from Walter Kolneder, *Die Kunst der Fuge*, vol. 3 [Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1977], p. 330).

45. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 219.

indication of “fulfilment beyond the limits of human achievement” of the “fragment of our life.”⁴⁶

In this context a recollection by Winfried Maechler seems to be worth mentioning. According to Maechler, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friends at the military front about the progress of the resistance movement, “as if it were a performance of the ‘Art of Fugue’ to which he had listened in Berlin.”⁴⁷ Maechler remembers: “I myself met him the last time on a holiday in Berlin, when he was just about to visit a concert with the ‘Art of Fugue’ in Charlottenburg castle. He promised to write me now and then about the progress of the planned plot, as if it was the performance of a concert. I received a card only once and it read: ‘Unfortunately the performance had to be postponed, because some artists had to cancel their participation’.” And Maechler comments further that “when the performance finally took place, it was already too late.”⁴⁸ *The Art of Fugue* as indication of the progress of the resistance movement, or the plot as performance of *The Art of Fugue* – the comparison gives a lot to think about. The fact that *The Art of Fugue* remained uncompleted, that it ends abruptly before reaching the goal, gives a fateful undertone to this comparison with respect to the military conspiracy. Where is the “fulfilment beyond the limits of human achievement” of this fragment of human history?

Conclusion

We have seen that Bonhoeffer understands the complexity of the “free play” with contrapuntal structures in Bach’s *Art of Fugue* as a sign pointing to the “Word” in the chorale. At the same time he underlines the status of music hovering between its “being tied to the Word” and its liberation to “true worldliness” in the “sphere of free play” sur-

46. Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, p. 215.

47. Winfried Maechler, “Vom Pazifisten zum Widerstandskämpfer: Bonhoeffers Kampf für die Entrechteten,” in *Die Mündige Welt (I)*, 3rd edition (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1959), p. 90.

48. Winfried Maechler, “Bonhoeffers Fanøer Friedenspredigt als Appell an die Christenheit heute,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Kirche in der modernen Welt* (epd-Dokumentation, Nr. 2-3/1981), p. 104.

rounding Christ and his commandment in the “sphere of obedience” structured by the “mandates.”

In some respects this theological concept of music resembles Karl Barth’s view, according to which the essence of music is “playing.” Whereas Bonhoeffer refers primarily to Bach, Barth refers to the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in order to demonstrate the playful character of music: “One aspect of the daily bread is playing. . . . But playing is a thing demanding mastery; it is therefore a high and austere thing. Listening to Mozart I perceive an art of playing, which I do not hear in any other music.”⁴⁹ According to Barth this refers to Mozart’s church music as well as to his secular music:

It is true that Mozart did not comply with the well-known programme according to which the tone has to serve and interpret the word only. . . . But is this the only possible programme of sacred music? . . . His tone seems to be — in his church music as well as in his other music — a free counterpart to each given word. . . . Here and there, he listens, he respects the word in its special content and character, but then he adds music to it, here and there, his music, — a thing tied to the word, but in this bond free in its own nature.⁵⁰

Likewise Bonhoeffer regards *The Art of Fugue* in its contrapuntal structure as an example of “free play.” This music takes up the “material,” by which “our lives” have been constructed, in order to process it, to play with it, and finally to bring it — as a “fragment” — before the throne of the Lord. Perhaps this indication of a “fulfilment beyond the limits of human achievement” may include the expectation of recapitulation or restoration of all things. In Walter Benjamin’s thesis “On the Concept of History” this expectation is represented by the “angel of history.” In the face of “the catastrophe, piling up fragments upon fragments incessantly,” he wishes to dwell on the ruins, in order to “resurrect the dead and to mend the smashed.”⁵¹

49. Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1956), p. 8 (my translation).

50. Barth, *Mozart*, pp. 26f.; cf. also Barth’s essay “Mozarts Freiheit,” in Barth, *Mozart*, pp. 31ff.

51. Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I/2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 697.

Likewise the notion of “polyphony of life,” conceived by Bonhoeffer as a musical description of a Christian life, does not mean harmony without conflict or dissonance. Rather it includes the perception of light and shadow, of love and suffering, of longing and passion amidst social crisis and catastrophe. In other words, it contains both aspects of hope: hopeful resistance against fate and submission to God’s will, full of hope as well.