

Gerald C. Liu. *Music and the Generosity of God*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 140 pages. \$70.

With *Music and the Generosity of God*, Gerald Liu has given us a gift. In what might initially strike readers as an obscure, scholarly defense of the theological significance of avant-garde musical expression, Liu zooms out by homing in on the minute particulars of the creative process of the likes of John Cage and elaborating beautifully on what the witness of such artists might mean for the way we see the world. “God gives apocalyptically” (13), Liu insists. And before his argument is through, he’ll have you mulling over the sounds—all the sounds—of our relentlessly given world as potential bearers of apocalypse, too.

Liu’s edifying deep dive into the thinkers and experiences that formed Cage’s intuition years before the appearance of *4’33”* offers an inspiring counterpoint to the derisive dismissal of his art as a kind of stunt beneath our interest at best and a nihilistic assault on theology at worst. Cage, it turns out, studied Greek and Hebrew as a young man in Los Angeles and even aspired to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps as a Methodist Episcopal minister but was dissuaded by his parents. Liu’s account convincingly demonstrates that the alleged divide between the secular and the sacred (or even art and ministry) never successfully imposed itself on Cage’s understanding of his own vocation.

We are made privy to the interactions of a hodgepodge cast of contemplatives (Merce Cunningham, F.O. Matthiesen, & Irwin Shaw, to name a few) who recognized the isolation of the arts from the unwieldy abstractions of religion, politics, and science as a sign of the human estrangement at the root of social catastrophe. We find Cage meaningfully situated within this community of sacred insight and mutual enrichment drawing inspiration from one another through lectures, performances, exhibits, and written correspondence but also through being called together in Poughkeepsie by Vassar College undergraduate women for a conference in 1948. It was here that Cage encountered the Lithuanian artist, Ben Shahn, a close collaborator of Diego Rivera and Walker Evans and other visionaries of everyday apocalypse. Shahn’s portrait, “Silent Music,” which features a gaggle of empty chairs and music stands, appears to have conjured out of Cage his own musings on the music that comes out of silence. As he put it at the conference, “Each one of us must now look to himself,” and music, like any art, is an “integrating occupation” that guides us toward “that final tranquility” (29) within which we can more righteously perceive ourselves. Liu describes the insight thusly: “Music is everywhere sounds are” (17).

Four years later, *4’33”* would debut at a benefit concert in the Catskill Mountains. Liu beautifully recounts the sacred opening that followed the performer David Tudor’s starting of a stopwatch while seated at a piano on a stage of an outdoor amphitheater. The sounds of wildlife, rustling leaves, raindrops, and confused human murmurings. In that space of time in which everyone within earshot was invited to follow Cage’s cue to look to themselves and tune in to the din of the given world, Liu asserts that a performative breakthrough occurred in which the distinction between music and the given sounds of human contexts was overcome.

The apocalyptic receptivity Liu urges upon us is, we come to realize, deeply in sync with the belief Cage exhibits in *4’33”*. As Cage asserts, “Something like faith must take over in order that we live affirmatively in the totality that we do live in” (54). As a lyrical theologian, Liu follows Cage’s lead by refusing to police, as a theological interlocutor like Jeremy Begbie appears to do, what sounds can be said to serve as God’s revelation. This is commendable, but

some readers will wonder what criteria he imagines we'd be right to apply as we seek to discern the what and the why of the sonic ubiquity he insists is apocalyptic.

But too fastidious an ear is inconsistent with Liu's own conversion to "the strange and sensationalized faith" (vii) he received upon praying a scripted prayer as an 11-year-old child beholding a tract after a concert by a band called "Truth" in Mississippi. By circling back to a somewhat random encounter with what could be derisively viewed as a form of propaganda, Liu reads his own life through the conviction that "we are made perfect by what happens to us rather than by what we do" (128), a theological assertion I believe Cage would find completely delightful.

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