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# Music and the Sacred

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## "God is a Harmonic Being": Musical Theology

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**by ROBINSON MCCLELLAN**

*This article is a summary of my presentation during the conference [James MacMillan and the Musical Modes of Mary and the Cross](#) at Notre Dame on September 15, 2012.*

I am fascinated by the current creative potential of 'musical theology,' a pre-Enlightenment relic from the German Baroque tradition of J.S. Bach. For Bach and others, music theory was a direct extension and reflection of metaphysical and religious truths. The major chord, three notes in one sound, was the trinity; equal temperament (a practical approximation that detunes each note slightly from the mathematical ratios of just intonation) represented the sinning imperfections of humankind, a musical Fall from God-made purity. As the Enlightenment gathered steam toward the end of Bach's life, such views seemed to many of his colleagues to be outmoded or even a threat, as the product of the very same ancient, superstitious religion that the Enlightenment sought to escape.

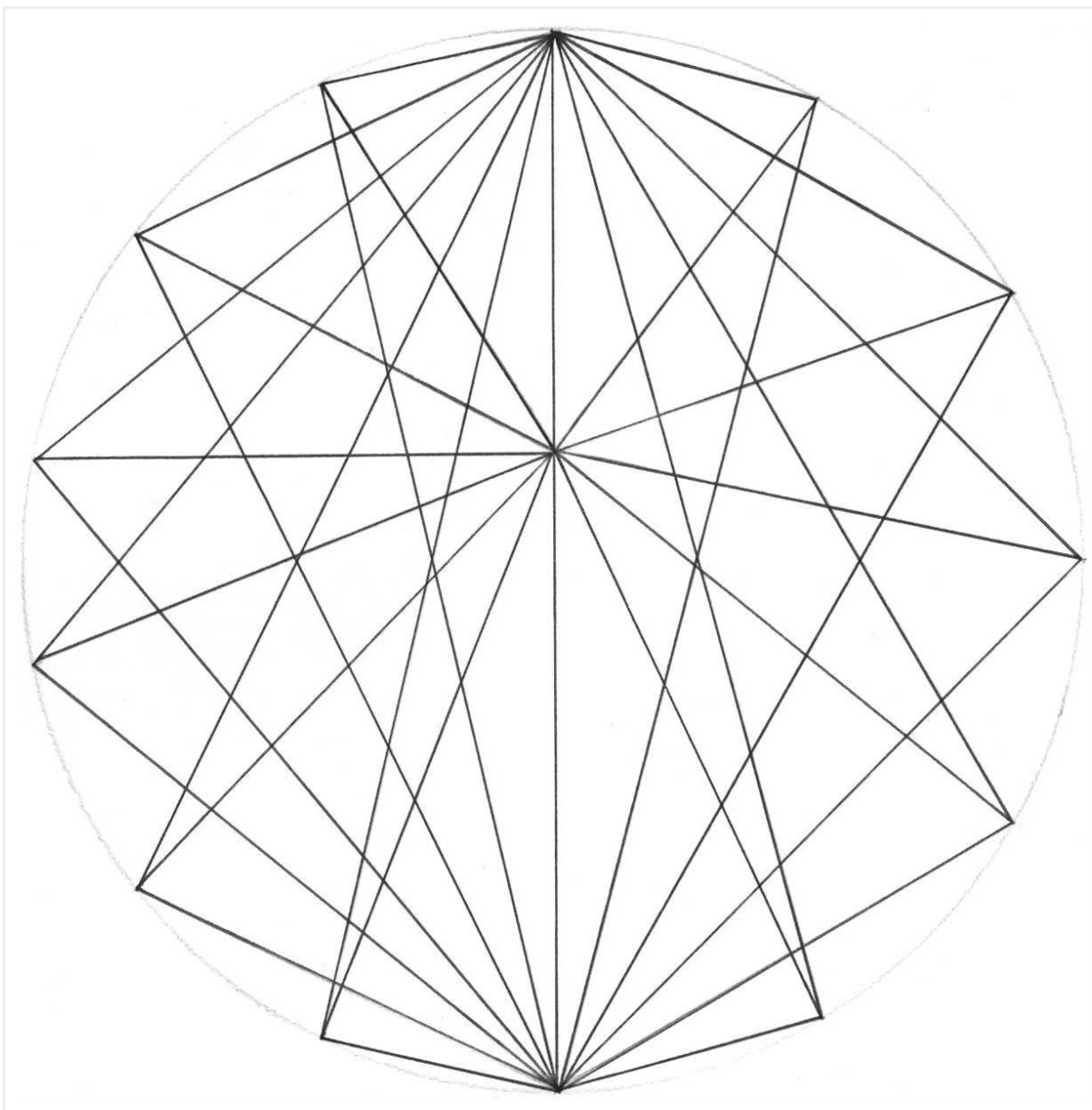
Writers like Scheibe attacked Bach's in-depth use of musical theology, along with his general style, accusing him of "too much art." Writing in Bach's defense, his friend Birnbaum countered that "God is a harmonic being." For Bach, composing was "not an act of free creation but...imaginative research" leading to a "musical science" that seeks 'insight into the depths of the wisdom of the world'" (Wolff, *Bach: The Learned Musician*).

The U.S. was founded on Enlightenment principles, and many of our deepest assumptions about art and life come from the era after Bach's lifetime. Although Bach's music is almost universally loved now, the stern Lutheran beliefs that infused its creation are counter-cultural today, and have often been ignored or

derided since his lifetime. Today, the idea that theology can find direct expression in music theory can seem at best a heady curiosity, and at worst a regression to a way of conceiving the world whose very nature challenges some of our most cherished cultural, social, and political achievements.

In today's 'new-music' scene, I feel there is a great deal of imaginative experiment, but not enough of the kind of profound thinking that made the music of Bach and others so meaningful. I believe that reviving older creative methods and conceptions of music helps revitalize music today.

In my 2008 work for Greek Byzantine choir and strings, [Nativity Kontakion](#), I discovered a beautiful harmonic structure based around the wide Byzantine whole step of  $14/72$ nds of the octave (a Western whole step is  $12/72$ ). Invert that wide whole step, and you get a narrow minor seventh, effectively equivalent to the "flat" seventh partial — one of those pure, God-made mathematical ratios that fell out of favor with the advent of equal temperament.



— Composer's visual representation of the tuning system used in the Kontakion.

From this simple basis I discovered an elegant system of harmonic possibility that allowed me to compose a complete work in an entirely new tuning system — ‘discovered’ through a Bach-inspired process of “imaginative research,” rather than created, and infused with musical-theological connections that hark back to Baroque metaphysics. For example, my use of the seventh partial mirrors and supports the subject matter of the Nativity-themed text of the piece: according to Werckmeister, one of the main Baroque-era theorists of this system, “the introduction of the first dissonant tone (the seventh partial), signifies that in this life some “dissonance” must be mixed in; the number seven represents the totality of heaven and earth together” (Chafe, *Allegorical Music*). What could better embody the idea that Jesus’ birth uniquely joined the human with the divine?

10

Tenors: melody  
Basses: ison

Verse 3.1  
Mode 4 Plagal

**SINGERS read Byz. neumes:**

3+2...  
6 beats

Instruments continue as before, but the voices now keep a steady pulse with them

3+2...

**Transcription:**

130

16

27

130

— Score Sample.

### [Nativity Kontakion Audio Sample](#)

This line of inquiry, applied in contemporary composition, have great value in helping to retrieve some powerful and beautiful ideas from a venerable world-view that has gotten the short end of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking.

Robinson McClellan is a composer, teacher, and scholar whose music is commissioned and published internationally. He teaches composition and theory at several schools in NYC, and he earned his doctorate in composition (DMA) at the Yale School of Music and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He is currently working on a series of sacred and secular cantatas in the tradition of Bach. For more info visit: [www.robinsomcclellan.com](http://www.robinsomcclellan.com)

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