

Same Canon, Different Resonance: Musical Reception of Biblical Texts of War and Peace after Total War

Choi, Yi Sak

Pastor, Hineni Church, Seoul, Korea. Th. M., M.C.M.

Orcid. ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4695-2423>

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Abstract

This article surveys how the war-and-peace texts of Scripture have been received in Western art music, with particular attention to the transformation of that reception after the two World Wars. It proposes the working category of acoustic commentary — reserved not for every musical setting of biblical material but for cases in which sound organization, temporal design, and listening position actively reframe the theological or political force of a text beyond simple quotation or illustration. After sketching a prehistory in which biblical war, prayers for peace, and public order could still coexist within relatively stable frameworks (from the L'homme armé Mass tradition through Handel to the first fractures in Haydn), the article traces four dominant acoustic grammars by which these texts are reorganized after total war: (1) direct quotation, whose self-evidence collapses (Schmidt, Pärt); (2) collision, in which liturgical peace-language is put on trial by the reality of war and, in Bernstein, by the polyphony already within the canon (Vaughan Williams, Britten, Bernstein); (3) nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, in which Revelation is received through time-design rather than citation (Messiaen, Martin); and (4) testimony and memorialization, where biblical language is re-summoned from within the experience of violence (Verdi, Schoenberg, Penderecki). Taking Revelation 1:3 — which blesses both the one who reads aloud and those who hear — as paradigmatic, the article argues that musical reception, approached through the axis of sound, constitutes not a decorative afterlife but a deepened mode of commentary on how the canonical text has lived again within history.

Keywords: reception history, the Bible and music, Revelation, apocalyptic literature, war and peace, acoustic commentary

1. Introduction*, **

“Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever’” (Rev 11:15).¹ This verse marks the climactic turn of the Apocalypse, where the seventh trumpet announces that sovereignty over “the kingdom of the world” has passed to God and to his Messiah — a transfer of dominion whose force is at once doxological and political, proclaiming the end of every rival rule. Its declaration that worldly dominion has become God’s carries an anti-imperial edge, in tension with Roman claims of enduring sovereignty — a dimension the author has examined elsewhere and to which this article returns in closing. It is precisely this charged declaration that later musical settings would receive in such divergent registers. In the oratorio culture of eighteenth-century London, a text like this could ring out as victory and sovereignty made audible, carried on the brilliance of trumpets and timpani. Yet two centuries later another composer — Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) — placed apocalyptic tradition within an entirely different temporality — in the barracks of a POW (prisoner-of-war) camp.² The canon had not changed; its resonance had. What this article pursues, then, is goes beyond how the Bible has been “used” in music to ask how one and the same canonical text can sound so utterly different from one historical moment to another.

This article surveys the reception of biblical texts of war and peace in Western art music, with particular attention to the transformation of that reception after the two World Wars. Its central proposal is a working category: *acoustic commentary*. This category designates not every musical setting of biblical material or the mere affective embellishment of a scriptural text, but specifically those cases in which sound organization, temporal design, and listening position actively reframe the theological or political force of a biblical text beyond simple

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¹ Scripture translations follow the NRSVue unless otherwise noted; renderings of the Greek and Hebrew are the author’s.

² Messiaen states in his preface to the score that his rhythmic language — replacing conventional meter with nonretrogradable rhythms and extended durations — serves to “banish the temporal.” Olivier Messiaen, preface to *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Paris: Durand, 1942); On Messiaen’s notable rejection of “no more delay” for Rev 10:6 in favor of “no more Time,” and on the 1941 premiere at Stalag VIII-A, see Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 51–54, 61–70.

quotation or illustration. Music, in this sense, does not replace verbal exegesis; it discloses another level at which scripture is interpreted, contested, and made present within history.

Such an approach presses reception-historical discussion within biblical studies beyond the analysis of literary or visual afterlives alone. Biblical texts are not only written texts to be decoded; they are also events that are recited and heard. This is especially true of apocalyptic literature, prophetic proclamation, and the Psalms, all of which presuppose forms of communal listening. Revelation 1:3 is paradigmatic in this respect, pronouncing blessing both upon the one who reads aloud and upon those who hear the words of the prophecy. Musical reception therefore belongs not to a merely secondary sphere outside the text, but to an interpretive field in which the text becomes newly present as sound under historically altered conditions.

The argument proceeds by tracing four dominant acoustic grammars through which biblical war-and-peace texts are reorganized after total war. These grammars are best understood not as a closed taxonomy but as heuristic categories—analytical tools for organizing a field of reception that would otherwise resist description. They are not claimed to be exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive: a single work may operate in more than one grammar at once, and the boundaries between them are deliberately porous. Britten's *War Requiem*, for instance, belongs primarily to the grammar of collision, yet its closing movement also participates in memorialization; Messiaen's quartet organizes apocalyptic temporality while also, in its citation of Revelation 10, engaging direct quotation; and Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms* enacts collision while disclosing a polyphony already internal to the canon. The four are offered here because they name the dominant acoustic operation at work in each case — the principal way in which sound reframes the text—rather than because they partition the repertoire into discrete classes. Their value is diagnostic: they make audible distinctions that a purely chronological or composer-centered survey would miss. These four grammars are: (1) direct quotation, in which the text is sung with little alteration but under transformed conditions of hearing; (2) collision, in which liturgical texts are set against the reality of war and thereby put under pressure; (3) nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, in which scripture is received through time-structure and acoustic design rather than through explicit citation; and (4) testimony and memorialization, in which biblical language is re-summoned from within the experience of violence. To fully grasp the force of these twentieth-century ruptures, one must first sketch the prehistory against which they become audible. In many premodern settings, biblical war texts, prayers for peace, and public or political order could still coexist within relatively stable frameworks of reception. After total war, that relative stability no longer held. The same canon could still be quoted, prayed, or remembered — but no longer under the same acoustic conditions.

Final clarification is required at the outset. I have argued elsewhere that Revelation 11:15 carries anti-imperial force in tension with Roman claims of enduring sovereignty.³ That claim is not reargued here. The concern of the present article is different: to show how such texts, once carried into musical reception, are reorganized into distinct acoustic grammars that illuminate changing historical conditions of reading and hearing.

³ Yi Sak CHOI, "Imperium Sine Fine Reversed - Epic Metre and Hebrew Kingship in Revelation 11:15." *Journal of Biblical and Ancient Studies* vol. 1, no. 2 (Dec. 2025): 135-162.

2. State of Research

Research on the Bible in music has grown substantially over the last two decades. Three achievements are especially clear. First, foundational reference infrastructure has been established. *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* has normalized the inclusion of musical afterlives within reception-historical inquiry, while *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* has helped consolidate the broader field.⁴ Second, specialized resources have emerged that make the terrain of musical reception more legible. Particularly significant is *The Bible in Music*, a pioneering reference work that fills a noticeable gap in reception studies by providing the first comprehensive dictionary devoted specifically to biblical reception across a vast range of musical genres, from classical oratorios to popular culture.⁵ Third, text-specific reception studies have shown that individual biblical passages can sustain dense musical afterlives that illuminate new, thought-provoking perspectives. S. Dowling Long's study of the King Saul narrative (1Sam 9–31) is exemplary in this respect; it offers an important precedent for examining how musical interpretations can shed light on a text's nuances and ambiguities, recovering a sympathetic reading of Saul that recasts the king as a tragic figure rather than the merely jealous and irrational villain of much traditional commentary.⁶

A methodological line of particular relevance is H. Leneman's proposal to read biblical retellings in opera and oratorio as forms of "musical midrash."⁷ The present article stands in

⁴ Dale C. Allison et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009 –); Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Siobhán Dowling Long and John F. A. Sawyer, *The Bible in Music: A Dictionary of Songs, Works, and More* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). The publisher and series editors describe it as the first reference work to treat the Bible in Western music, the Bible in music having previously lagged behind comparable reference works on the Bible in literature, art, and film.

⁶ Siobhán Dowling Long, "The Madness of King Saul: An Interpretation of I Samuel 9–31 in Music," in *Reading the Sacred Scriptures: From Oral Tradition to Written Documents and their Reception*, ed. Fiachra Long and Siobhán Dowling Long (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 18, esp. 263–64. Surveying operas, oratorios, and songs from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, Dowling Long argues that musical settings "shed light on the biblical texts' nuances and ambiguities," often placing a different emphasis from traditional interpretation: against commentators who cast Saul as "insanely jealous, murderous in intent and irrational," the musical afterlife is "largely sympathetic of Saul," recovering a perspective "oftentimes neglected or glossed over by biblical commentators." She further notes that listeners who return to the text after hearing it performed do so "with heightened awareness of its details, and sometimes, with more searching questions" — a listening-oriented claim directly germane to the present article's wager on sound.

⁷ Helen Leneman, *The Performed Bible: The Story of Ruth in Opera and Oratorio* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007); Helen Leneman and Barry Dov Walfish, eds., *The Bible Retold by Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers and Filmmakers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015).

continuity with that proposal, but shifts the center of gravity. My concern is not primarily with narrative retelling, paraphrase, or librettistic transformation, but with how sound itself reorganizes a text's force through duration, layering, intrusion, suspension, and the framing of communal hearing. Likewise, reception-history commentaries such as Kovacs and Rowland's volume on Revelation show that musical reception may legitimately belong within commentary practice, not merely as cultural appendix but as interpretive evidence.⁸

Nevertheless, a critical methodological gap remains unfilled. Musicological scholarship on the individual works treated here is undeniably rich; however, its governing questions tend to remain centered on composer, work-history, and internal formal analysis. By contrast, scholars in biblical studies have treated musical reception only intermittently and rarely through listening-oriented categories. What remains less fully developed is a typology that asks how biblical war-and-peace texts are acoustically reorganized after total war — not simply retold, but made to sound under newly fractured ethical, political, and temporal conditions. Within biblical studies, moreover, a growing body of work has begun to take seriously the aural and performative dimension of apocalyptic literature itself. Kayle de Waal's aural-performance analysis of Revelation 1 and 11, for instance, reconstructs how the Apocalypse would have been *heard* by its first-century audience — developing “sound maps” and an aural-performance commentary that attend to aural markers, communal reception, and collective memory.⁹ The present article extends this turn in a different direction: where de Waal asks how Revelation sounded to its original hearers, it asks how the same text has been made to sound again, centuries later, within the catastrophes of modern history. Acoustic commentary is thus not an importation of musicology into biblical studies, but a continuation of biblical scholarship's own attention to the hearing of the text.

The scope of the article is limited primarily to Western art music. Though popular music, film scores, and political mass-musical appropriations constitute vital areas of inquiry, they remain beyond the present survey. The aim here is more modest and more specific: to offer a preliminary but analytically ordered account of how biblical war-and-peace texts are redistributed across four dominant acoustic grammars in the wake of the twentieth century's catastrophes.

3. Before the Rupture: Relative Coexistence and Emerging Fracture

Prior to the twentieth century, at least in the major traditions of liturgical music and oratorio, biblical texts of war and prayers for peace could often coexist without the radical ethical rupture later imposed by total war. This does not mean that premodern reception was free of tension.

⁸ Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); on musical reception within the commentary, see the introductory survey “The Reception of the Apocalypse” (14ff.) and the comment on Rev 11 (122ff.).

⁹ Kayle B. de Waal, *An Aural-Performance Analysis of Revelation 1 and 11*, Studies in Biblical Literature 163 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

It means, rather, that war symbolism, liturgical prayer, divine sovereignty, and public order could still be joined within relatively stable interpretive frameworks. Reception was governed less by suspicion toward the text itself than by the assumption that scripture could underwrite, sanctify, or magnify in sound the political order of the present.¹⁰

An early and revealing example is the *L'homme armé* Mass tradition. From a modern perspective, the incorporation of a secular war-song melody into the structure of Mass Ordinary may appear paradoxical. Yet within the symbolic world of the late medieval and Renaissance church, the sign of armed conflict and the prayer of the altar could still inhabit the same liturgical horizon. The language of warfare did not necessarily negate the language of peace; both could be drawn into a single sacramental and political imagination.¹¹

A more public and political form of this relative stability appears in the English oratorio tradition, especially in George Frideric Handel (1685–1759). Works such as *Israel in Egypt* (1739; premiered London, 4 Apr. 1739) and *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746; premiered London, 1 Apr. 1747), and subsequent reception histories of *Messiah* (1741; premiered Dublin, 13 Apr. 1742), show that biblical victory texts could resonate within narratives of national preservation, providential governance, and public memory. In such settings, scriptural war and apocalypse were not yet typically heard as texts under ethical suspicion. They could still function as musical resources through which a polity heard its victories echoed back to it in biblical form.¹²

By the late eighteenth century, however, signs of fracture begin to emerge. Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)'s *Missa in tempore belli* (1796; premiered Vienna, 26 Dec. 1796) is especially important here. The mass does not yet collapse under the pressure of the Napoleonic wars, but military sonorities — specifically, threatening timpani motifs and harsh trumpet fanfares — intrude upon the liturgical pleas for peace (Agnus Dei) in ways that suggest a new instability. War no longer remains comfortably outside the liturgical sphere; its acoustic traces begin to enter the space of prayer itself. What later twentieth-century works would radicalize, Haydn already prefigures, leaving an imprint that reaches as far as the Agnus Dei of L. v. Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* (1819–23; premiered St. Petersburg, 1824): the point at which the language of worship can no longer ignore the sounds of violence.¹³

¹⁰ Craig Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 7, “Sounds and Symbols of an Armed Man” (175ff.), on the Christ-warrior symbolism and the *L'homme armé* Mass tradition; cf. ch. 4, “The Warrior, the Lamb, and Astrology” (101ff.).

¹¹ Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior*, ch. 7.

¹² Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. Part II, “The Patriot libretto from the Excise Bill to the Jew Bill: Israelite oratorios and English politics” (171ff.), and ch. 12, “In time of war” (288ff.). Ch. 5, “The survival of epic” (127ff.), also resonates with the author's argument on epic metre. For the textual arrangement of Rev 11:15 in *Messiah*, see also Laurie Schulman, “Program Notes | Handel's *Messiah*,” New Jersey Symphony, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.njsymphony.org>.

¹³ Georg Feder and James Webster, “Haydn, (Franz) Joseph,” *Grove Music Online* (2001; rev. 2024), sec. 8,

The significance of this prehistory lies in contrast. What binds these otherwise different premodern examples together is the relative intelligibility of joining sacred text, political order, and public sound without the severe fracture later imposed by total war. After the twentieth century, that relative stability can no longer be assumed.

4. Four Dominant Acoustic Grammars after Total War

4.1. Direct Quotation: From Public Victory to Minimal Petition

Direct quotation often masquerades as the most faithful and transparent form of biblical reception; nevertheless, it is never interpretation-free. Its very apparent transparency raises the sharper question: which text is sung as-is, under what historical conditions, and for what kind of communal hearing? Direct quotation is therefore not a stage prior to interpretation; it is already a historically situated reading.

In earlier periods this mode could align rather naturally with public confidence. In Handelian reception, direct quotation often reinforced the sense that biblical victory and public order could still be heard in continuity.¹⁴ After the two World Wars, however, such directness no longer carried the same self-evidence.

Franz Schmidt (1874-1939)'s *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (1935-37, premiered Vienna, 15 Jun. 1938) illustrates the ambivalence of direct quotation under altered conditions. Formally, the work stands among the clearest large-scale examples of scriptural fidelity: Revelation is brought forward as text, not merely as thematic allusion. Yet the circumstances of its Viennese reception in 1938 render such fidelity historically unstable. The work's apocalyptic grandeur cannot be heard apart from the political environment of Austria after the Anschluss. Direct quotation here preserves the authority of the biblical text while simultaneously exposing the uneasy possibility that such authority may be made to resonate within a compromised public order.¹⁵

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)'s *Da pacem Domine* (2004, premiered Madrid, 1 Jul. 2004) represents the same grammar in a nearly opposite mode. The work sets a ninth-century Gregorian antiphon whose text itself derives from biblical prayers for peace (2 Kings 20:19; 2 Chronicles 20:12,

“Sacred vocal music.” Feder and Webster note that the *Agnus Dei* of the *Missa in tempore belli* features threatening timpani motifs and harsh trumpet fanfares, while the *Benedictus* of the *Missa in angustis* (the 1798 “Nelson Mass”) culminates in another harsh fanfare passage “out of context”; both invoke the travails of the Napoleonic wars and influenced the *Agnus Dei* of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*.

¹⁴ Smith, Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought, 288–90.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Birnbaum, “Bibelrezeption im Jahr 1938: Franz Schmidts „Buch mit sieben Siegeln“,” *feinschwarz.net*, 31 Jul. 2020; For factual detail (premiere, scoring), see Peter Franklin, “The Book of the Seven Seals,” American Symphony Orchestra, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://americansymphony.org>.

15; Psalm 72:6–7); Pärt places this chant melody in the alto as a *cantus firmus* and surrounds it with three voices in his *tintinnabuli* style, so that the prayer is heard not as proclamation but as sustained, contemplative utterance. Here direct quotation no longer serves public triumph, nor even liturgical confidence in any straightforward sense. The brief prayer for peace is reduced to a minimal verbal unit, repeated with extraordinary restraint. That Pärt began the work two days after the 2004 Madrid train bombings, as a memorial to the victims, underscores the point: the effect is not one of abundance but of compression — direct quotation survives as the smallest scriptural prayer that can still be uttered after devastation.¹⁶

4.2. Collision: The Language of Peace Put on Trial

A distinct grammar of collision arises when texts long imbued with liturgical authority are forced into deliberate confrontation with the reality of war. In these works the inherited language of peace no longer inhabits a self-contained liturgical sphere. It is displaced into a setting where it must confront the historical conditions that seem to deny it.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)’s *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936; premiered Huddersfield, 2 Oct. 1936) establishes an early, potent precedent for this acoustic displacement. The recurring liturgical plea of the Agnus Dei is placed alongside Whitman’s war poetry, John Bright’s political speech, Jeremiah’s lament, and prophetic visions of peace from Isaiah and Micah.¹⁷ The result is not a simple sequence of texts but a listening situation in which peace-language passes through war-language and returns changed. Prophetic peace no longer sounds as a remote guarantee; it is heard as a petition that has already traversed historical violence.¹⁸

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)’s *War Requiem* (1961–62; premiered Coventry, 30 May 1962) radicalizes this collision. The Latin Requiem Mass is interwoven with Wilfred Owen’s poetry, yet the force of the work lies not simply in juxtaposition but in acoustic segregation. Chorus

¹⁶ “*Da pacem Domine*,” Arvo Pärt Centre, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://www.arvopart.ee>. Jordi Savall commission; composed shortly after the March 2004 Madrid bombings; medieval antiphon source.

¹⁷ On the text assembly of *Dona Nobis Pacem* (1936) — the Agnus Dei refrain set among Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* poems (including the pre–World War I setting of “Dirge for Two Veterans”), John Bright’s 1855 speech, Jeremiah, and a closing montage from Micah, Isaiah, and the Psalms — and on its influence on Britten’s *War Requiem*, see Hugh Ottaway, rev. Alain Frogley, “Vaughan Williams, Ralph,” sec. 6, *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.42507>: the idea of combining Latin liturgical material with biblical texts and modern vernacular poetry “surely influenced Britten’s more famous War Requiem.”

¹⁸ For the work’s premiere (Huddersfield, 1936) and its place in the festival-cantata tradition, see Malcolm Boyd, “Cantata since 1800,” *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000382030>. On the interwar context (composed amid the Abyssinia crisis, on the eve of renewed war), see “*Dona Nobis Pacem*,” program notes (Rochester: Eastman Philharmonia; Eastman-Rochester Chorus; Eastman Chorale, May 3, 2024), 4–5.

and full orchestra embody the ritual and public dimension of inherited liturgy; tenor and baritone with chamber ensemble carry the historically particularized voice of trench warfare; boys' choir and organ create a distant and fragile sound elsewhere. These layers do not easily coalesce. Instead, the work continually destabilizes liturgical consolation and denies easy resolution. Peace-language is not discarded, but neither is it allowed to stand unchallenged. History itself puts this language on trial.¹⁹ Yet collision is not the whole of the work: its closing movement turns from confrontation toward commemoration, drawing even the enemy dead into the same requiem frame. The *War Requiem* thus inhabits two grammars at once — collision giving way, at the last, to memorialization.

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)'s *Chichester Psalms* (1965; premiered New York, 15 Jul. 1965) adds an important complication. In the second movement, Psalm 23 in Hebrew is disrupted by the violent irruption of Psalm 2:1–4: “Why do the nations rage?” The significance of this moment is that the collision is not imported from outside the canon; it is staged between two scriptural voices already coexisting within the Psalter.²⁰ The music renders audible the unresolved polyphony already present within scripture itself.

4.3. Nonverbal Apocalyptic Temporality

Apocalyptic literature frequently demands an entirely different acoustic operation, one that dispenses with direct citation to take shape instead through nonverbal time-organization. Such nonverbal operations hold particular weight for apocalyptic literature, whose force lies not only in imagery or content but in the experience of temporality: delay, interruption, suspension, irruption, and the pressure of the end.

That Revelation presents itself as a text to be read aloud and heard (Rev 1:3) is not merely a rhetorical frame but, as de Waal's sound-map analysis shows, a constitutive feature of how the Apocalypse organizes its meaning for a listening community.²¹ The musical receptions traced here can be read as a long afterlife of that original auralty—the apocalyptic text continuing to

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of Britten's acoustic segregation and its destabilizing effect on the liturgy, see Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: War Requiem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52–53 and 55–56. Cooke notes that Owen's poetry, delivered by the male soloists and chamber ensemble, “seriously undermines the stylized religious phrases of condolence and consolation” represented by the full chorus and orchestra (52). The distant boys' choir further adds “the impassive calm of a liturgy that points beyond death” (56). These disparate layers uniquely and seamlessly merge over a common ground-bass only in the *Agnus Dei* (71–73).

²⁰ “Chichester Psalms (1965),” Leonard Bernstein Office, accessed 16 Jun 2026. Details the Psalm 23 and Psalm 2:1–4 juxtaposition in the second movement. For a detailed musical analysis of this Psalm 23–Psalm 2 collision — including Bernstein's use of parallel major and minor keys to dramatize the contrast — see Joshua Henry Fishbein, “Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms: An Analysis and Companion Piece” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015).

²¹ de Waal, *Aural-Performance Analysis*.

seek its meaning in the act of being heard.

Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940–41; premiered Görlitz, 15 Jan. 1941) is the quintessential example. Explicitly naming Revelation 10 in his preface, Messiaen anchors the work in a single scene: the angel of Revelation 10:5–7, who raises his hand to heaven and swears that “there will be no more time” (Rev 10:6: χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται). Messiaen pointedly declined the common rendering “no more delay,” reading the phrase literally as the abolition of measured time itself — the end of the succession in which future turns into past. The quartet does not “depict” this apocalyptic scene; it enacts the angel’s oath in sound. Reorganizing listening through extended durations, non-teleological pacing, and the systematic dismantling of forward drive, Messiaen lets measured succession recede until the listener is drawn into a temporality where chronological time yields to suspension. Revelation is received not by quotation but through the acoustic reconstruction of the very end of time that Revelation 10 proclaims.²²

Frank Martin (1890–1974)’s *In terra pax* (1944; premiered Geneva, 7 May 1945) offers a related but distinct case. Here biblical reception is carried less by the withdrawal of the text than by the architecture of textual arrangement. The work opens with the four horsemen of Revelation 6 and closes with the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21, while the journey between them is mediated through Isaiah’s consolation, the Lord’s Prayer, and war-shadowed hope.²³ The significance of this structure extends beyond mere thematic contrast; the work translates the war–peace dialectic internal to apocalyptic scripture into the temporal architecture of the whole composition. Given the composer’s own remark that he held no illusions about postwar peace, the decision to close with Revelation 21 should be read not as optimism but as eschatological hope spoken from within disillusionment. Revelation is received through the large-scale organization of beginning, middle, and end, rather than through isolated quotation.

In both instances, the biblical text transcends mere verbal content, becoming audible through time-design itself. Nonverbal reception, therefore, should not be treated as a weak or secondary form of reception. In some instances it is one of the most intense forms, because it presses biblical categories — especially apocalyptic temporality — into the deepest structures of listening experience.

²² Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*.

²³ “*In terra pax* (1944),” Frank Martin Society, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://frankmartin.org>. Commissioned by Radio Geneva in 1944 to be broadcast upon the announced cessation of hostilities, the oratorio was premiered in May 1945, days before the German surrender; it opens with the four horsemen of Rev 6 and closes with the new heaven and new earth of Rev 21, by way of Isaiah’s consolation and the Lord’s Prayer. On the eschatological rather than optimistic register of the ending, Martin’s own statement is decisive: he writes that he held no illusions about the peace that would follow the war, yet sought to express “the transition from deepest despair to hope for a shining future” — a peace that “can only be a hope, a determination, a faith, a bridge to an uncertain future.”

4.4. Testimony and Memorialization

Finally, a grammar of testimony and memorialization takes shape as biblical texts are re-summoned as languages of testimony, memorialization, and ethically damaged remembering. Here the crucial distinction is between appropriation and witness: between the mobilization of biblical language for communal self-legitimation and its reappearance from within exposure to violence.

The afterlife of “Va, Pensiero” from Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)’s *Nabucco* (1842; premiered Milan, 9 March 1842) is instructive as a case of appropriation — instructive precisely because the object of analysis is not the 1842 score itself but its twentieth-century afterlife. The chorus sets the Hebrew exiles’ lament largely in unison — a single collective voice rather than individuated polyphony — and its significance lies less in any direct quotation of Psalm 137 than in the way this exilic biblical imaginary, passing through operatic form, was *retrospectively* constructed as a national symbol within the memory politics of the unified Italian state. As Parker has shown, even the celebrated rendition at Verdi’s 1901 funeral was a pre-planned official event rather than a spontaneous outpouring; the chorus’s patriotic aura was largely a later construction. Set beside the testimony of Schoenberg and Penderecki, this trajectory makes “Va, Pensiero” a revealing counter-case: here biblical language functions less as witness from the wound than as a public emblem of collective identity, and the unison voice that made the chorus so memorable is precisely what suited it to stand for a people.²⁴

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947, premiered Albuquerque, 4 Nov. 1948) inverts this dynamic of appropriation entirely. Through the composer’s own dramatization, beginning from survivors’ accounts, the work re-presents the terror of the camp—the violence of assembly, roll call (Abzählen), and the moment just before deportation to the gas chamber. The violent collision of the narrator’s English, the German commands, and the music culminates in the sudden Hebrew singing of the *Shema* (Deut 6:4: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד). In this context, the biblical confession no longer serves triumphal appropriation. It becomes the last language by which those facing death refuse erasure — a language of testimony that refuses mythologization.²⁵

Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020)’s *Dies Irae* (1967; premiered Oświęcim [Auschwitz], 16

²⁴ Roger Parker, “Verdi politico: a wounded cliché regroups,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 427–436, esp. 430–431 (the 1901 funeral rendition was itself a pre-planned official event, 431 n. 1); the patriotic-symbol status was retrospectively constructed after unification. cf. Parker, “*Arpa d’or dei fatidici vati*”: *The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma: Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, 1997).

²⁵ Michael Strasser, “‘A Survivor from Warsaw’ as Personal Parable,” *Music and Letters* 76, no. 1 (1995): 52–63 (commission and compositional genesis, 52–54; the text as authorial and deliberately symbolic, 58–60; the setting is an anonymous concentration camp rather than the Warsaw ghetto, 58; the meaning of the *Shema*, 60–61); Amy Lynn Wlodarski, “‘An Idea Can Never Perish’: Memory, the Musical Idea, and Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947),” *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 581–608 (memory and testimony, 586–89; the narrator as the work’s “internal witness and author,” 589).

Apr. 1967) expands this from individual witness to collective memorialization for the victims of Auschwitz. The oratorio assembles biblical passages, liturgy, and literary texts into a commemorative acoustic space.²⁶ What matters here is not the isolated citation of scripture. The language of Revelation and the Psalms is juxtaposed with fragments from Aeschylus's tragedy — sung in the Greek original while the contemporary poets' texts are rendered into Latin. That the work closes with the resurrection proclamation of 1 Corinthians 15:54 (κατεπόθη ὁ θάνατος εἰς νίκος), shows that this commemoration is not merely a record of despair, but a canonical form of hope spoken from within the geography of mass death. In such works, biblical reception becomes neither celebratory triumph nor neutral remembrance. It becomes the difficult re-summoning of scripture under the ethical conditions created by catastrophe.

5. Conclusion: Hearing the Canon after Catastrophe

This article has argued that the musical reception of biblical war-and-peace texts after total war can be understood through four dominant acoustic grammars: direct quotation, collision, nonverbal apocalyptic temporality, and testimony/memorialization. These grammars are not rigid taxonomic boxes, but recurrent ways in which scriptural texts are reorganized when historical violence alters the conditions of hearing.

The central claim has been methodological as much as historical. Musical reception transcends decorative afterlife or illustrative appendix to verbal exegesis. In many cases it functions as *acoustic commentary*: a mode in which sound, temporal structure, and communal listening actively reshape how scripture becomes present. This is particularly important for apocalyptic literature. Revelation, after all, presents itself not only as text to be interpreted, but as prophecy to be read aloud and heard. If so, then the re-presencing of scripture in sound belongs within the legitimate field of reception-historical and even commentarial practice within biblical studies. It is worth marking precisely how this category differs from its closest neighbors. Leneman's "musical midrash" names the way opera and oratorio elaborate and retell biblical narrative, filling its gaps much as classical midrash does; reception-historical commentary, in the manner of the Blackwell series, gathers such afterlives as evidence for interpreting a text, yet its attention remains largely on the visual and the verbal. Acoustic commentary differs from both not in its object but in its locus of meaning: it asks how sound organization, temporal design, and the position of the listener themselves rework the theological and political force of the text — how the text signifies differently when heard, and not only when read or retold. Where midrash supplements the narrative and reception-historical commentary catalogues its afterlives, acoustic commentary treats the act of sounding as itself an interpretive event.

The historical trajectory traced here also carries a sharper conclusion. Before the twentieth

²⁶ "Dies Irae," Schott Music, accessed 16 Jun 2026, <https://en.schott-music.com>. The Aeschylus fragment is sung in Greek while the contemporary poets are rendered into Latin; the work closes on 1 Cor 15:54.

century, biblical war and peace could often be heard within relatively stable alliances of liturgy, polity, and public order. After the catastrophes of modern warfare and genocide, the same canon no longer sounded under those same conditions. It could still be sung, but not innocently; quoted, but not transparently; remembered, but not without fracture. Handel's triumphant apocalyptic proclamation and Messiaen's suspended apocalyptic temporality therefore do not merely show two styles. They reveal two historically distinct conditions under which scripture becomes audible.

The trajectory traced here opens at least three avenues for further inquiry. First, the inquiry must be extended beyond Western art music into popular, cinematic, and political-musical media. Second, the reception of biblical war-and-peace texts in Korean church music deserves dedicated study, particularly in relation to the trauma of national division, war memory, and liturgical language. Third, reception-historical study of apocalyptic literature would benefit from developing "sound" not as metaphor alone, but as a rigorous interpretive axis alongside text, image, and vision.

Ultimately, the reception history of the Bible provides a concrete record of how the canon bears witness to itself in time. The same canon can resonate so differently not simply because of the inherent polyvalence of the text, but because historical violence reorganizes the conditions under which certain scriptural possibilities become audible.

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