

Music and “Mystical Truth”: William James, Joseph Segond, and Early Twentieth-Century Psychologies of Religious Experience

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Pragmatist philosopher William James, in the series of Gifford lectures given in Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902 that would comprise his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, observed that music has a special relationship to the mystical. “Music,” he wrote, “is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth.”¹ The idea that music can “speak” a “mystical truth” smacks of a familiar nineteenth-century metaphysics of music, a vestige of Schopenhauerian claims that music is the unmediated revelation of a metaphysical Will; indeed there is nothing about James’s account of music that contravenes turn-of-the-century thought on music as an autonomous art. Yet (and despite James’s own considerable influence) many of the contributors to a post-Jamesian “science of religions” in the early twentieth century, increasingly uncomfortable with assertions about “mystical truth,” would undertake a reconsideration of the role of music in sacred experience that was fundamentally at odds with contemporaneous theorizations of music as autonomous.

In this paper I discuss accounts of musical rhythm in Joseph Segond’s 1911 *La prière: étude de psychologie religieuse* (a work that betrays considerable debts to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). Deeply preoccupied with the distinction between the “psychologically real” and the “metaphysically real,” Segond contended that mystical prayer was essentially a special mode of contemplative attention characterized by a “felt Presence” of alterity, though he situated the metaphysical reality of this “Presence” outside the bounds of psychological inquiry. Segond posited that music’s special “kinship” with prayer derives from the ability of musical rhythm to inculcate such contemplative attention—a position that turned music into a subset of generalized rhythmic behaviors with demonstrable effects on human physiology, and which brought Segond’s psychology of prayer within the intellectual orbit of then-current sociological accounts of music and ritual in Indigenous societies (even as Segond continually argued for the primacy of psychological methods over sociological ones). As a result, Segond scrutinizes the relationship between audible sound and subjective effect far more closely than ostensibly “scientific” psychologies of music *qua* music from the same period, which tended to assume from the outset that music has unfettered access to the inner truths of unconscious interiority. At a historical moment at which epistemological authority on the nature of the human person was migrating away from philosophy and towards the newly minted social sciences, Segond’s account of music as a component of sacred experience, I argue, unsettles intellectual-historical narratives of Western European musical thought of the early twentieth century, suggesting ways in which ideas of music as an autonomous aesthetic object were formed not only by ideologies of European hegemony over its colonial Others (as Gary Tomlinson and others have argued) but also by Europe’s imagining of itself as secular in contradistinction to a superstitious or magical “primitive.”

¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), 412.