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Review of 'The Lyre of Orpheus' by Christopher Partridge

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The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane. By Christopher Partridge


Until recently the idea that religion and popular music shared common ground would have been largely confined to analysis of lyrics and the faith (or otherwise) of individual artists. However, the work of theologian David Brown has begun to open up a much broader field of study and Christopher Partridge’s volume enables us to explore this wide-ranging terrain even further.

Partridge begins by using the myth of Orpheus as an image for the beguiling power of music, particularly in the context of the sacred. The impact of music is not just felt by individuals but also has the power to define and influence affective space, by which he means those forms of culture that bring together the flux of human emotion and meaning. A good example is his discussion of the track ‘Personal Jesus’ originally written and recorded by Depeche Mode in 1990 as a song about dependency in personal relationships. It was covered in 2002 by Johnny Cash singing as a troubled Christian believer and again in 2004 by Marilyn Manson, identified as a critic of mainstream religion. Partridge observes of the covers of this one song that: ‘Both are equally powerful, but quite distinct from the original text, evoking very different affective states and, therefore, distinct meanings’ (p 43).

He notes how permeable the conceptual membranes are in this subject area. Consequently Partridge discusses a broad scope of musical genres, which he explores with the help of philosophers, sociologists and theologians such as Kant, Adorno, Durkheim, Lynch and Farmer; whilst at the same time delving into the creative spaces of artists like Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, Bjork, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Tory Amos, Genesis P-Orridge, Bob Marley and more. His analysis unfolds over five chapters of varying length – 1) ‘society and culture’, 2) ‘emotion and meaning’, 3) ‘transgression’, 4) ‘romanticism’, and 5) ‘religion’ – with chapter 3 being pivotal as it sets out his understanding of how terms like “sacred” and “profane” are inextricably linked. His scrutiny of popular Goth music and culture leads to the conclusion that in the contemporary world: ‘Religion may have been abandoned, but the supernatural world it helped construct has not … The sacred and the profane are re-imagined’ (p 91). This is a thesis which he proceeds to explore across many forms of musical culture.

Christianity has tended to respond to this situation in two ways: (a) by demonizing popular music, or (b) converting popular music into a sacred domain. At the start of rock music with Elvis Presley, churches tended to take the route of demonization but particularly since post-Reagan America and the rise of Christian music and festivals the second option has been favoured. However, this scene must also be viewed from outside the churches where a wide variety of spiritual and religious narratives, categories and tropes continue (in Partridge’s words) ‘to accrue social capital’ whilst at the same time being ‘transgressive’ (p 243). If we wish to better understand the nature of early 21st century culture in which churches are
immersed, we need to have a better appreciation of how popular music and religion interact and Partridge’s work is a fascinating and insightful place to begin.

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*Word count: 582*