Music as Spiritual Experience

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines a phenomenography of spirituality in the music experience examining the internal relationship between the experiencer and the experienced and its diverse awarenesses (Marton and Booth 1998). It will examine these questions:

- Is all music a sacred experience?
- Is there a secular music?
- Is the aesthetic a contemporary version of spirituality?
- Can spirituality be freed from a particular religious tradition?

The model proposed is based on five domains that can be identified in accounts of the musicking experience, the way the phenomenon is reviewed in research traditions, how it appears in the literature, treatises and textbooks and how it has been handled in different cultures. It approaches music through the experiencer rather than the music itself. It seeks to re-establish a notion of spirituality as relationality within the musical experience based on Buber’s (1970) notion of the I/Thou experience, drawing on theorists such as Dewey (1929, 1934), Maslow (1967), Turner (1969, 1974a & b, 1982), Csikszentmihalyi (1993), Jackson (1998), Hay and Nye (1998) and practitioners such as Custodero (2002, 2005).

Introduction

There is a fine Jewish story that describes the origins of the Nigun the wordless Jewish song tradition:

The rabbi goes to the woods to celebrate his ritual. He finds the place, lights the fire, and sings the service. God says: ‘It is enough.’

The rabbi goes to the woods to celebrate the service. He finds the place but has forgotten how to light the fire. God says: ‘It is enough.’

The rabbi can no longer find the wood but he sings the service. God says: ‘It is enough.’
The rabbi can no longer remember the words of the service. But he sings the tune. God says: ‘It is enough.’ (Shillor 1999)

The story represents the move from the time when music was inextricably bound up with religious ritual to a freestanding music independent of the ceremony. And yet in this story, this now wordless song is still conceived of as a religious experience.

- Does this mean that all music is a sacred experience?
- Is there a secular music?
- Is the aesthetic a contemporary version of spirituality?
- Can spirituality be freed from a particular religious tradition?

This paper will engage with these through Victor Turner’s notion of ‘liminality’ – an intense, transformative experience resembling that of religious ritual.

**Theoretical Framework**

Throughout the history of Western music spirituality and music have been associated – from the ancient goddess traditions (Drinker 1948/1995), through Plato (Godwin 1987 pp3-8) and Hildegard (Boyce-Tillman 2000b). In the hands of the philosophers of the Enlightenment the link between music and the spiritual became weakened and the search for the spiritual became an essentially human search located in the unconscious (Harvey 1999). The realm of the imagination became devalued
The spiritual became associated with notions of self-actualisation (hooks, 1994) and self-fulfilment in Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1967) in which he included the aesthetic – the need for beauty, order, and symmetry. As Western culture edged towards an aggressive individualism, a sense of finding some place in a larger whole – the cosmos – became a priority in the human search. This process of objectifying the cosmos associated with the advance of science had not happened in the same way in Eastern cultures; and it was on these cultures that the New Age (Boyce-Tillman, 2000a, pp. 155-166) and some areas of rock and jazz traditions (Hamel, 1978/1976, pp. 134-135) drew, in order to offer the desired sense of relationality. This included a more holistic view of the mind/body/spirit relationship, with transcendence approached through physical practices such as chanting (Gass and Brehony 1999) or dancing.

A Phenomenography of the Experience

This paper draws on this history to establish the five domains of the music experience (Boyce-Tillman 2004).

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1 To take Allegri’s choral piece *Miserere* from sixteenth Italy, in the area of Materials it consists of a choir. In the area of Expression it is peaceful with fluctuations as the plainchant verse come in. In the area of Construction it is an alternating psalm with full harmonic verses and plainchant alternating verses. This is intimately related to its role as a psalm liturgically. In the area of Value it is held as a masterpiece within the western canon of music and is frequently recorded and achieved a place in classical music charts and it represents an important statement about the Christian’s attitude to
• The way the phenomenon is reviewed in research traditions
• How it appears in the literature, treatises and textbooks
• How it has been handled in different cultures
• Discourses and accounts of unreflected experience
• Interviews and accounts where an interviewee is in a state of ‘meta-awareness’ including those in the RERC Archive

Drawing on these it is clear that the musical experience is one of encounter and I am using the frame of the ‘I /Thou’ experience described by Martin Buber (1970) “But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an it.”(Buber 1970 p57). The philosopher, Levinas, saw the questioning of the Same as the basis of ethics. The encounter with the Other is an encounter with infinity and calls the Self into question. In the welcoming the Other but not reducing it to the Same as the self there is in the experience of encounter which he calls transcendence (Levinas 1969 p33).
The domains that I have developed reflect the varied focus of the experiencer during the experience (which here includes a variety of ways of musicking – listening-in-audience, composing/improvising, performing/improvising). They are:

- Expression – anOther self
- Values – anOther culture
- Construction – the world of abstract ideas
- Materials - the environment

All music consists of organisations of concrete Materials drawn both from the human body and the environment. These include musical instruments of various kinds, the infinite variety of tone colours associated with the human voice, the sounds of the natural world and the acoustic space in which the sounds are placed. This area of the musical experience is one that can re-establish the role of the material world in the experience of transcendence. Modernism traditionally denied this (Taylor 1992) for a world of abstraction. Within western theology, human beings became alienated from the natural world – or indeed superior to it. This resulted at best in a patronizing stewardship and at worst domination and outright rape. All music making using instruments involves human beings in contact with the natural world. It is one of the most intimate relationships human beings have with the environment other than eating it. In traditional societies a drummer would reverence the tree and the animal that give the material for his/her drum. Sadly in the west the loss of the connection with the natural world has been reflected in the way we treat and regard instruments. We need to re-establish this reverence in relation to instruments in our western fragmented culture.
The area I have called Expression is concerned with the evocation of mood, emotion (individual or corporate), images, memories and atmosphere on the part of all those involved in the musical performance. It is the area where emotions are validated within the experience and this was crucial in William James’ writing (1903/1907). This is where the subjectivity of composer/performer and listener intersect powerfully. The listener may well bring extrinsic meaning to the music – meaning that has been locked onto that particular piece or style or musical tradition because of its association with certain events in their own lives. Popular music, in particular, often conjures up a range of associations as does hymnody associated as it often is with significant rites of passage like baptism, marriage and death. The phrase ‘They are playing our tune’ reflects the association of certain emotional events with certain pieces. Downplayed by classical theorists (Rahn 1994 p55) this area has been rediscovered in texts such as Green (1988, 1997). The experience of encounter in music may be the music itself or another person within the musical experience as this is an area of empathy, imagination and identity creation.

In the area of Construction, effectiveness often depends on the right management of repetition and contrast within a particular idiom. The way in which contrast is handled within a tradition – how much or how little can be tolerated – is often carefully regulated by the elders of the various traditions – be they the composers or theoreticians of the Western classical tradition (including cathedral organists) or the master drummers of Yoruba traditions. Construction issues are well documented in the pieces that make up the classical canon (Goehr 1992). It is in this is the area
where many claims for a spirituality associated with order have been made by traditional writers on aesthetics and spirituality linked with James’s view of the religious experience associated with harmony (William James 1903/1997 p59, Jamie James 1993).

The area of Values is related to the context of the musical experience and links the experience with culture and society. The musical experience contains both implicit (within the music) and explicit (within the context) Value systems. However, these two areas of Value interact powerfully. Notions of internal values are a subject of debate in musicological circles (McClary 1991, 2001) but as soon as a text is present – either in the music or associated with it (Blake 1997 p7), Value systems will be declared, like the words of hymns. Music mirrors the structures of the culture that created it and people’s ways of being in them (Shepherd and Wicke 1997 pp138-9). This is why feminist theologians fail to get a spiritual experience out of much of traditional hymnody with its non-inclusive language.
The Spirituality of the Experience

Whereas these four domains exist as overlapping circles in the experience, Spirituality, I am suggesting, exists in the relationship between these areas. I am defining it as the ability to transport the audience to a different time/space dimension - to move them from everyday reality to 'another world'. The perceived effectiveness of a musical experience – whether of performing, composing or listening - is often situated in this area (Jackson 1998). Indeed some would see music as the last remaining ubiquitous spiritual experience in a secularised Western culture (Boyce-Tillman 2001b). Here, I have subsumed within my own thinking the following ideas:

- ecstasy, often associated with idea of 'the holy' coming from the religious/spiritual literature (Otto 1923, Laski 1961)
- trance coming from anthropological (Rouget 1987), New Age (Collin 1997, Goldman 1992, Stewart 1987) and psychotherapeutic literature (Inglis 1990)
- mysticism, coming from religious traditions, especially Christianity (Underhill in Rankin 2005)
- peak experiences (Maslow 1967)
- the religious experience (Rankin 2005)
- liminality (Turner 1969, 1974)
Turner’s concept of liminality draws on an analysis of ritual. The notion of transformation is central to religious ritual whether it is a Christian Eucharist or a shamanic healing rite (Driver 1998). It can be personal or communal or both. Van Gennep (1908 quoted in Roose-Evans 1994 p6) saw parallel stages in any ritual. This he entitled: ‘severance, transition and return’. Severance he associated with leaving everyday life by means of ritual gestures like holding hands or lighting candles. In the transitional or liminal phase contact was made with the transpersonal; and this might take the form of change of consciousness. The Return phase signalled a coming back to earth and the beginning of a new life. It is possible to identify these moments in a musical piece even when not associated with ritual and to relate accounts of transformation through experiencing music with this concept. He develops it to include the notion of encounter, sometimes with the material through the process of healing and sometimes inner to do with mind or spirit.

Clarke’s notion of the transliminal way of knowing is drawn from cognitive psychology (Thalbourne et al 1997). In her thinking, this way of knowing is to do with our ‘porous’ relation to other beings and is where spirituality sits. It is in contrast to 'propositional knowing' which gives us the analytically sophisticated individual that our culture has perhaps mistaken for the whole (Isabel Clarke 2005 p93). To access the other way of knowing we cross an internal ‘limen’ or threshold. Langer (1942) suggested a ‘non-discursive’ form of communication that characterised music and religion which is different from propositional ways of knowing.
McDonagh draws on the concepts of meditation and contemplation in prayer as the descriptors of an experiencer’s relationship to an art work. Meditation he characterises as mental activity, but contemplation is surrender to the work of art:

> Her consciousness has become possessed by a particular ‘topic’ which is now operating spontaneously from within the subject as it were. McDonagh 2004 p169

It is interesting to compare how this language reflects a way of knowing that is different from everyday (propositional) knowing (Isabel Clarke 2005). It is a both/and logic which may appear as a way of not knowing as its central feature is paradox. In this way there may be a measure of pain in the spiritual experience as it is held in a paradox with joy as many people experience in the late Beethoven quartets:

> From about age of 36 onwards when listening to certain passages – Beethoven’s late quartets I have had the feeling that he had touched a realm of experience beyond our normal consciousness, full of serenity and joy, the uplands of the Spirit, and through his music, I could reach not so much a sense of God, as of another world. RERC 002285 1971 59 year old woman

The Spiritual domain, then, is defined as a time when in the experience of the experiencer there is a perfect fit between all the domains (Sullivan 1997 pp9-10). This can happen gradually as this account shows:
For the first twenty-five minutes I was totally unaware of any subtlety…. whilst wondering what, if anything, was supposed to happen during the recital.

What did happen was magic!

After some time, insidiously the music began to reach me. Little by little, my mind all my senses it seemed- were becoming transfixed. Once held by these soft but powerful sounds, I was irresistibly drawn into a new world of musical shapes and colours. It almost felt as if the musicians were playing me rather than their instruments, and soon, I, too, was clapping and gasping with everyone else….I was unaware of time, unaware of anything other than the music. Then it was over. But it was, I am sure, the beginning of a profound admiration that I shall always have for an art form that has been until recently totally alien to me. (Dunmore 1983 Pp20-1)

We see here the Materials of the sound and the ‘shapes’ of the Construction gradually begin to be integrated into his/her own being so that the experiencer and the experienced become fused. It can be represented like this:
FIGURE ONE The complete spiritual experience
To achieve a ‘fit’ that is likely to produce a spiritual experience in the experiencer, there has to be sufficient congruence between the various domains of the experience (at least two, I suggest) between the experienced and the experiencer. This will be affected by words and experiences surrounding the event.

It is possible that the spiritual domain is most likely to occur in situations where there are shared value systems, experiences that are shared between the musicking participants, where the materials and constructions are familiar. This is clearly reflected in the theologian Hans Kung writing about his experience of late Mozart:

I gratefully confess that thirty-five years ago… the Clarinet Concerto KV 622, this last orchestral work of Mozart’s completed precisely two months before his death, of unsurpassable beauty, intensity and inwardness, completely without traces of gloom or resignation, delighted, strengthened, consoled, and in short brought a touch of ‘bliss’ to a doctoral student in theology almost every day.. Kung 1992 pp27-8

Here we can return to our opening questions about all music being sacred (Feld, 1982). Is it possible for people to get a spiritual experience from music culturally foreign to them? Here a diagram showing the interface between the areas of religion, culture and spirituality is helpful:

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2 However, this is not entirely predictable because of the extrinsic elements involved in the experience and the openness of the experiencer at that particular time.
FIGURE: Spirituality, Culture and Religion (Ainsworth Smith 1998)

Chapter 8: Figure Three

Diagram A
In an exercise I carry out which involves playing pieces from different cultures to a group of people and asking if they perceive the experience as spiritual, they are most likely to agree that the slow movement of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet (which has no declared spiritual intention) is spiritual for them rather than music with a religious intention from a different culture such as the Australian aboriginal. This enables us to problematise the notion of a universal sacred music. Although the spiritual event itself may be non-verbal, it will usually be reflected on either during or after the event. Then various cultural constructions may be put on it like heaven, God, the angels, the Virgin Mary and so on.

The converse of this is where this is a disruption in one area or between two areas that means there is no spiritual experience at all. I now find it difficult to listen to Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* without thinking of the powerful moment in *Apocalypse Now* where it is associated with the flight of helicopters in the American war in Vietnam. I am suggesting that it is not possible to put these disruptions in other domains aside and that they will interrupt the likelihood of entering the spiritual domain where notions of culture, meaning, construction and materials need to intersect in a special way for this to occur.

Here is a diagram showing an experience with disruption in one or more areas.
FIGURE: The absence of a spiritual experience
But there are different intensities in the experience which may start by a close relationship between two of the areas. The more areas resonate together with the experiencer, the more intense the experience will be. The domains reflect the complexity of the relationship between the experienced and the experiencer. Some of them like Materials and Construction appear to sit more tightly in the experienced (although the experiencer’s perception of them will be different); others express more clearly the subjective interaction between the experiencer and the experienced.

The spiritual experience can be entered through the three activities central to music making:

- Performing/improvising (Gonski 1999)
- Composing/improvising (Paterson and Odam 2000, Downes 1998)
- Listening-in- audience (Moody 1999, King 1992)

The starting domain of the experience may tend to be different in the three differing activities, because the process of the experiencer is different. So a performer may be acutely aware of the domains of Materials and Expression, whereas the composer by the handling of Construction and Expression and the listener in an audience may be taken up with Expression and Values. The other domains then come into play later.
Summary

I have suggested that there is a domain of Spirituality within the experience of music that can be interpreted as the fusing of other domains. This is related to the notion of the encounter experience of difference-in-relationship:

- It can be approached through all music making activities, although the domain in which the experience starts may differ.
- It can be related to a universal spiritual frames but is often linked with a particular traditions culturally.
- The aesthetic may be a secular term for this domain of the musical experience.
- The unitive nature of the experience leads to feeling connected with something beyond and outside the self - the wider community of human beings and/or the natural world and/or spiritual beings.
- The spiritual experience is born of the right relationship between the experiencer and the experienced.

This article has only scratched the surface of what is a complex area to research and yet one that is increasingly of interest to contemporary society which is in a state of spiritual searching, some of which at least, is done through music. We have seen how it is also place where cross-disciplinary approaches may prove very fruitful. It could represent an area where some of the traditional dilemmas of theology are brought together – the absolute transcendence of a theologian such as Barth (as discussed in Taylor 1992 pp155-8) and the absolute immanence of
theologians such as Altizer (1966). Its multiplicity of domains enables this paradoxical dilemma to be reconciled, as Hildegard wrote in the twelfth century:

The words of a hymn represent the body, while the melody represents the soul. Words represent humanity, and melody represents divinity. Thus in a beautiful hymn, in which words and melody are perfectly matched, body and soul, humanity and divinity, are brought into unity. Scivias 3.13.1. Van der Weyer (1997) p79

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