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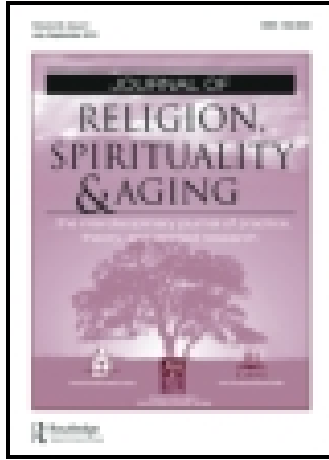
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Older People's Experience of Spirituality Through Music

Terrence Hays, PhD
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ABSTRACT. This qualitative study examines the spiritual meaning ascribed to music by older people. In-depth interviews were used to explore the connection made between music and the spiritual experience with a sample of older Australians living in the community aged 60 years and older. The findings show how music provides older people with ways of experiencing and expressing a sense of spirituality. The results remind gerontologists that they need to be mindful in understanding the different ways that older people express and experience spirituality, even though the individual may not readily identify as being religious. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Aging, music, spirituality, identity, beauty

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INTRODUCTION

Music impacts on people's lives both directly and indirectly and is part of our everyday life. It is readily heard through advertising, film, radio, television, worship and sporting events. It has been estimated in a survey conducted in the United States that three out of four older persons listen to classical music for at least one hour everyday, and that in the UK over 11 million people listen regularly to at least one BBC radio music program (www.thepowerofmusic.co.uk, 2004).

Music also serves various functions in a person's life depending on life needs and circumstances (Hays, Bright, & Minichiello, 2002) and can also be a way of giving meaning to people's life experiences; for example, relationships, family, emotions, and spiritual experience. In the religious context, music plays a significant role in liturgies and is often used in services associated with rites of passage such as baptisms, confirmation, weddings, and funerals. Gaynor (1999) postulates that in spiritual and mystical belief systems there is a 'universal motif' of sound. He further suggests that in religion and wisdom traditions, whether it be Eastern or Western, people tend to sing more prayers than speak them. Thus, it could be assumed that sacred song and chants might intensify the religious experience for the individual.

Is it possible then that music has spiritual significance for some older people apart from the more traditional liturgical and community expression of spirituality through music? This study explores the various ways music is experienced and used as way of personal spirituality.

WAYS OF EXPERIENCING SPIRITUALITY

According to Jung (1958), spirituality can be considered as the substance of religious beliefs that also includes our belief in ourselves. It is manifested through a person's intelligence, personality, self-conscious, and will. Spirituality represents a person's ability to access those higher powers that can elevate them in thought and action. These thoughts then have the potential to provide individuals with the inspiration and desire to create a more meaningful and higher quality of life for themselves, and in many cases, the people around them (Scarantino, 1987).

Clair (1994), argues that *spirituality* can be an internal state of being that goes beyond forms of expression and involves a concept of deity, God, or higher power. It is also something that can be partly conceptualised by the individual and, not surprisingly, some have noted that the

development of a person's spirituality may stem from a person's search for meaning in life (Storr, 1992). However, defining one's sense of spirituality can be highly personal and a difficult journey, and for some people, it is not always aligned with formal religious practices or observance (Bright, 1997).

According to Rumbold (2003), many older people become aware of their spiritual needs when they have to cope with the changed physical, emotional or social environment in their life, and thus seek to redefine their personal identity in these changed circumstances. He further suggests that spirituality might be described as the web of relationships that provides coherence and meaning in people's lives.

Sloboda and O'Neill (2001), suggest that music can provide people with ways of discovering and interpreting their sense of identity. It can be a medium through which people are able to express emotional states that are closely associated with *self* (Sloboda & O'Neill, 2001). DeNora (1999:50) states that people can find a sense of *self* in music because 'musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity.' This is because music acts as a mirror that allows people to interpret, transfigure or disfigure the image of their identity as they so choose. Sloboda and O'Neill (2001:423) further argue:

Music provides numerous ways in which musical materials and practices can be used as a means of self-interpretation, self-presentation, and for the expression of emotional states associated with the *self*.

This study explores the significance of music and the personal experience of spirituality from the perspective of older people. The paper explores the personal dimension and connection between music and spiritual experience, with the description of *spirituality* and the musical experience grounded in the narratives of the informants of the study.

METHODOLOGY

The informants were drawn from various backgrounds and included older people who had no training in music, those who had some training and those who had been professional musicians. There were no major differences between the responses of informants who had been professional musicians and those who had little or no training in music. However, those people with little or no training often were more articulate

about the importance of music and how it contributed to their well-being and quality of life. The informants were drawn from major Australian cities including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Newcastle and rural and coastal towns, such as Armidale and Coffs Harbour. The total number of informants interviewed individually was 38, comprising 18 women and 20 men aged 60 years and over, with the oldest informant aged 98. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the informant and ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of New England before the interviews began.

Two focus group interviews were part of the research design and conducted in the initial stages of data collection to identify primary themes that would inform the interview schedule for the in-depth interviews. The first focus group was a 'heterogeneous' group that consisted of three men and five women who had varied backgrounds, affiliations and exposure to music. The second group was a 'homogeneous' group of eight older men who identified as amateur musicians and were actively involved in music activities in their life.

Following the two focus group interviews, 38 informants were interviewed using in-depth interviews with only four of these informants having been part of the initial focus groups. Of the 38 people interviewed using in-depth interviews 19 were male and 19 female. The age of the participants ranged from 60 through to 97 years. The level of musical expertise of the informants ranged from no musical skills or knowledge and mostly engaged with music through listening (14 informants), to those who had some training during their formative years and were amateur musicians (12 informants), to those who had been (and in some cases were still) professional musicians (12 informants). Twenty informants lived in cities and 18 lived in rural communities. The data presented in this study is that collected from the in-depth interviews. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants and then later transcribed for analysis by the authors.

The in-depth interviews were informal, with the informants being told that the interview would be an open discussion that centred on the meaning and importance of music in their lives. The interview scheduled included open-ended questions. It placed the life experience of the participants as the focus of the conversation and asked them to reflect on the importance of music in their daily lives, and the perceived benefits of being engaged in music making or listening. The conceptual framework used to guide the analysis is based on the *self* as an acting agent capable to use symbols to help define his or her experiences. Like DeNora

(2000), this study frames music as a symbol used by people to give meaning to experiences and emotions.

During the interviews specific music genres were not discussed nor were the informants asked to identify any particular style that they preferred. This was purposely done to lessen any possible interpretation of bias on the part of the researchers and to maximise the depth of response from the individual. However, it became fairly clear that the people who were most passionate about music in their life mostly focused on classical music. It is also interesting to note that many informants said that they enjoyed their retirement because they now were able 'to find time to indulge,' including spending more time on music activities.

The analysis focussed on thematic discovery from the transcripts recorded through the interviews with the informants. This included themes around identity, well-being, connection, spirituality, and the benefits of music. This was achieved using the methodological principles of open and axial coding described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The researcher identified relevant thematic codes by a constant examination of themes and cross-checking of these through referencing to individual transcripts and as a collective data set. There were four rounds of interviews and, within each round, data collection centred on emerging themes, issues or ideas grounded in the data. For example, participants spoke of spirituality and the connection of music. As the interviews progressed, the research team sought clarification on this connection and how people gave meaning to spirituality. The coding categories were then validated by other members of the research team.

FINDINGS

The concept of *self* is a central focus of the experience of music in the lives of some older people. Each person interviewed for this study had a unique story to tell of his or her experience of music. The story often told of how the informants interpreted the experience of music in terms of identifying and describing their sense of *self*. This included their understanding of private and public identity, their sense of spirituality, and sense of well-being.

For many of the informants, music is a medium by which they have been able to develop an identity and an understanding of *self*. This is largely because music appeals to their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual *selves*. As one informant stated '*through music the intellectual and*

emotional being come together as a whole.' The concept of music and *self* as described by the informants had many facets. These include identity, ways of knowing, expressing and feeling, spirituality, and music as a contributor to people's well-being and quality of life.

It was interesting that so many informants openly prefaced their comments about music and spirituality by stating that they did not see themselves as religious nor spiritual people, yet then continued speaking of music in relation to 'spirituality' and using other such personal descriptives as 'soul' to describe their experiences of music. Many informants also stated that they found it difficult to describe the concept of spirituality but knew that there was a connection with music. For example Peter when he described his experience of music:

I would normally perhaps prefer not to think about at all. It takes us to the edge of the known I suppose it takes us, we're faced with an abyss in lots of respect. . . . I think one is transported to the edge of awareness so that one is facing the unknown, what is something beyond, it's like looking out into space I suppose and realising that one can't comprehend it.

Personal Insights and Reflections: Defining the Spiritual Experience

The participants described music as a symbol that helped them assign meaning to experiences and act and react to their world. For example, nearly all participants indicated that they were more spiritually aware when they listened to music. It was music that put them in touch with a personal sense of spirituality that otherwise they may have not found elsewhere. For example, Elizabeth stated:

. . . I'm not religious but I'm spiritual. I'm religious too, but I mean I prefer to look at the wider concept, the spiritual part of being, rather than the 'churchianity' of religion. Music is not at the centre of my spirituality, but it's very close to it. I suppose the spiritual part of a person is that unique part of a person that connects them with universal energy . . . and music does that for me.

Music for many participants facilitated a meditative state and was used as a way of connecting and expressing spirituality. Music provided a transcendental experience that put them in touch with their *self*. For

others music provided an extra edge to their spiritual experience and had the capacity 'to lift them' out of the ordinariness of their lives.

Um . . . well I mean I don't have a religion as such. I don't have the belief system and I believe sort of probably in the Ten Commandments, this sort of thing, but religion, that I don't know. But I think the music is a lifting experience. It's a spiritual experience, which does take you out onto another level, let's put it that way, which nothing else will. It's transcendental! (Jane)

Music can add that extra dimension because we live in a world of reality and I think at times we need music to lift us out of the 'mundaneity' of reality to realise of course there is a spiritual life beyond what is the mere physical and the mere visible. We need to be able to have something that will add that extra edge as it were, that extra sharpness to the soul that one particularly has, and music can add that from time to time. (Bob)

Joan spoke of music having the capacity to connect her with a larger world that she believed was essentially spiritual. It was this world of the spirit that she closely associated with her and other people's emotions.

. . . music is about connecting with people, yes but moving into a different world and a bigger world and a world of the spirit to some extent and your emotions. (Joan)

Music was considered 'spiritual' by some participants because it influenced them emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, and physically, yet at the same time had no body. For Bob, music was at times felt unearthly. He explains:

. . . music is spiritual. It's something of the thought. If it is said that we come from a divine being, and that divine being is spiritual, in other words, not having a body, then music itself can have the same spiritual uplifting. To listen to a beautiful Bach work, to even listen to say some of the marvelous music that Wagner wrote, there is a spirituality. There's something unreal or unearthly about the feeling that you get when you listen to that particular music. Yes, I get a lot of spiritual thought.

Music was considered 'uplifting,' 'ennobling,' 'invigorating,' and inspired transcendental thought. It could make the individual feel spiritually in tune with life and the world. This was captured in Margaret's statement when she said:

Because music of itself should be of the spirit, it should be uplifting and it should be ennobling. And I would think that most music does that a lot to my spirituality. But music can add to that because it's very nice to be able to do things, but if you have the advantage, well like wearing a beautiful cloth, it adds that little bit more to your own spiritual existence as human being.

The experience of spirituality, like the experience of music, was considered highly personal and individualist and for many participants defied description through language. Many, however, believed that spirituality was about feelings, emotions and intuition. It is also about solace, comfort, and connection. The following extracts provide an insight into the connection between music, spirituality, and personal intuition.

. . . And the spiritual part is very, very hard to define because it comes into left brain, right brain sort of stuff and the spiritual aspect of life is connected very much with one's faith in the belief systems, which usually is . . . well that's either developed instinctually if you look back at the Freudian stuff, or it's something which is just there. And if it's just there, it's the intuitive part of a person. So the intuitive part of a person's make-up is related I believe very strongly to the soul. So that the development between what you could call spirituality and soul growth or what is the soul, what part of the person is that, has a very broad connotation. It's I believe every person has that, obviously we ritualise that in Church ceremonies, for the part it continuously other religions ritualise it in very, very many other ways. It's becoming more widely accepted that the spirit within a person, that twinkle within them, that flame, which is always there doesn't now pass through one generation to another. (Elizabeth)

For most participants the experience of spirituality through music was about self discovery rather than solely about religion or doctrine. Through music people discovered their identity, feelings, and emotions. Margot provides an explanation of how she interprets and experiences spirituality through music:

. . . you can have no religion, no faith, but you do have a sense of spirituality. Well for me it is because music touches my inner depth. I mean it doesn't just stay on the surface. Music therefore seeps into my definition of soul.

Spirituality and Beauty

Kenny (1996:120), defines beauty as that 'which is capable of moving us or striking a certain harmony' in people's lives. It offers people a sense of coherence that comes from a sense of connection. Informants provided examples of how music was used to facilitate the experience of beauty and spirituality in a person's life. The participants believed that there was a strong relationship between spirituality and beauty. When they experienced beauty through music they felt that there was also often a spiritual experience. One of the informants explains:

To listen to a beautiful Bach work, to even listen to say some of the marvelous music that Wagner wrote, there is a spirituality, a sort of . . . there's something unreal or unearthly about the feeling that you get when you listen to that particular music. Yes I get a lot of spiritual thought. You can also be invigorated to think, look at all that beautiful music! (Bob)

Informants also revealed that music had an important role in facilitating the experience, contemplation and expression of spirituality in life. For example, Maureen described the experience of listening to music as being similar to prayer. She saw music as a way of being in touch with God. For her, music was a direct gift from God, and like all beauty, was in the eye of the beholder. She explains:

And so that's why it is prayer. And I think that for me, that's what music is. I mean I'm not always as conscious of that, but I will often be driving along and hear something and I'll say: Oh! Thank you God for that and sometimes somebody will hit a note, you know a soprano just with such clarity. So for me it's such a gift from God. I've got a fairly broad definition of God. But for me, any beauty, if it's like a sunset or whatever, is just another manifestation of that.

Jane described listening to music as feeling in touch with God. The beauty of music for her was a tangible way of experiencing God and a

way of reflecting on the spiritual influence in her life. Music was a form of meditation and prayer.

. . . music is life giving in I think just for its beauty. And also for me, it's prayer. It really is because I think it's one of the great manifestations of God's wonder, the wonder of music, the beauty of music. I mean you know, if you talk about God is beauty, God is wonder, God is this, God is that, well so is music to me. So it's a great manifestation of that . . . Well, if I'm listening to something like Borodin's 'Nocturne,' I would probably never put that on and just walk around the house. If I put that on, I would probably sit here and really take that it and I would listen to it for its own beauty. But as I said, for me that that would be the reflective beauty of God touching me.

For Peter, beauty was closely associated with a search for perfection that carried a spiritual component. As a musician he strived to achieve the ideal through his instrumental playing. While he recognised perfection was unreachable he considered it an important quest that carried over into other areas of his life.

. . . I'd have to see music for me as part of striving for perfection really, its a kind of metaphor for perfection in life itself and in that respect it's a spiritual thing too because I guess in one's life one is constantly striving for perfection in relationships and whatever one does and all the rest of it, and usually one falls far short of course. Hearing very fine performances one realises that people have come very close to the ultimate perfection. I mean to hear Elizabeth Schwarzkopf or Gerald Souza singing Schubert for example, and then to hear a good amateur, one comes to realise that the really gifted top professional is very close to perfection really. That in itself is a thing of perfection. Whatever the form it may take, it has a powerful spiritual importance I think!

Music: The Private and Communal Expression of Spirituality

The communal expression and experience of spirituality is often communicated through the liturgical role of music. In this context music is used to express ideals, religious beliefs and promote public and private dedication. Music facilitates a feeling of communal interaction and personal faith by engaging people to participate in worship and prayer

through singing, listening or playing musical instruments. For some participants, it was an essential part of a liturgy. For example, John argues:

Well in the Episcopalian church, especially in the Eucharist, if there weren't the music I'd feel that there was something missing. Some people may not find that so at a service, but music enriches the service, in religious life in general. And I think it helps people to relate to one another.

Not surprisingly, the meaning of music for many of the participants was strongly associated with the music of the church they attended when growing up. The participants stated that their love of music grew from the singing and listening to sacred music. They had strong memories of those times past, for example, John explains:

I became fairly familiar with a lot of sacred religious music just simply through going to Church on a regular basis and I became very astute and very impassioned by some of the great hymns, the traditional hymns of the 17th, 18th century and later the 19th and 20th century. And I think that lead into an understanding and appreciation of finer sacred music which meant that as my own knowledge developed I became interested in areas such as Gregorian Chant.

For some informants their performance of music in relation to liturgy and worship was part of their sharing and public expression of a 'God given gift' and fulfilled a ministerial role within their church. This role required a high level of performance skill and special consideration to the choice of music for the liturgy. This was described as follows:

. . . I adopt that approach when I sing for a religious service. I sing as well as I can because I'm offering my voice. If I lead other people to sing, whether they sing well or better than I, or worse than I do, we're praying together, I believe that. It's pretty simple, but that's how I approach the singing at church. (Owen)

I look for special music for the Church's seasons—Pentecost and Lent etc. . . . its part of my Ministerial role as a Church musician. (John)

In Pam's life, music fulfilled a spiritual need because it directly related to her sense of soul, spirit, and mind. Through music, she experi-

enced God and felt an intense pleasure of well-being and emotional satisfaction. Jane, however, stated that she did not have a 'religious side' nor did she subscribe to any particular belief system. However, for Jane, it was through music that she could come to feel a sense of wonder and transcendence that she did not experience elsewhere in her life. She described music as being uplifting and spiritual. Maureen also describes how she uses music to help facilitate spiritual reflection when reading. The following extracts provide an insight of the close association of music with one's personal sense of spirituality.

My soul, my spirit, my inner self needs the music to fill me with joy, to fill me with wonder, to fill me with peace. If there's a God, I think that's God talking to me. Um, it gives me intense pleasure and intense emotional satisfaction, so music contributes to my well-being. Without it, I don't know what I would do. Perhaps I'd sing, I don't know. But I can't sing well enough to satisfy. So the more music I get of the music that I love, the better I feel. It's stimulating for my brain. I think it gets me awake, thinking well, functioning well. (Pam)

I actually don't have let's say a religious side, but I find the music um . . . there is something very special about it, but it does bring a wonderment, which I don't normally have. Um . . . well I mean I don't have a religion as such. I don't have the belief system and I believe sort of probably in the 10 Commandments, this sort of thing, but that I don't know. But I think the music is a lifting experience. It's a spiritual experience, which does take you out onto another level. Let's put it that way, which nothing else. (Jane)

. . . but if I'm doing some spiritual reading, reflective reading, um yeah, I will put on something without words because I'm useless if it's got words. So I would put on maybe one of the violin concertos that I love or something like that. (Maureen)

DISCUSSION

The study shows that music provides meaning in people's lives and helps them to focus their experience and expression of spirituality. Interestingly, some of the participants identified themselves as non-religious in the traditional sense of belonging to a particular faith or denom-

ination, yet felt that music provided them with an increased sense of being that was beyond themselves and their immediate reality. This study suggests that music has the potential to provide older people with transcendental experiences and ways to validate and review their lives.

Limitations of the current study need to be acknowledged. This qualitative study did not aim to make generalizations about how frequently people express their sense of spirituality through music, nor test specific hypotheses predicting which people are more likely to indicate a connection between music and spirituality. It did, however, show how music can enhance expression of one's spiritual experience. Further quantitative studies with a representative sample of older people are needed to identify and detect major differences between, for example, gender, age or religious groups, with regards to the use of music for expressing spirituality.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that it is important for gerontologists to understand the potential and need for older people to be able to express and feel a sense of spirituality in their lives. This especially would apply for older people who are vulnerable because of illness and disability, or are dependent on other people for their needs, as well as the healthy aged, even though this study focused on older people living in the community as opposed to residential care. It is also important to note that spiritual expression and experience does not necessarily have to be linked with the traditional concept of religious devotion, and can apply to people who may not identify as religious.

Today many older people find it difficult to define what it is to be spiritual or to describe the experience of spirituality in their lives. If it is a quest for meaning as suggested by Cobb (2001), then modern definitions of spirituality should also focus on the personal meaning of the experience. It is therefore important that people working in aged care are aware of needs of older people and open to ways of helping and facilitating these needs. Music can provide many people with ways of experiencing and expressing their spirituality in their life that otherwise they might find difficult to access in other tangible ways. In the words of Storr (1992:188), 'for those who love music, it remains as a fixed point of reference in an unpredictable world by being a source of reconciliation, exhilaration, and hope.'

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