

Music and Spirituality

It appears that all religions use music in their services. The Baptists use gospel songs, the Catholics have hymns and chants as do the Buddhists. I think the Quakers even have music at their services. The Ancient Greeks would summon the Gods with music. Bach wrote, played and conducted for the Lutheran church. Why is music so important for almost all religions?

Music is the universal language. People from every culture, race, and religion respond to music. Music is used to lead soldiers into battle, the African slaves had spirituals. It is used to inspire, to calm and excite and bring out emotions such as anger, love, sadness. The wealthy and the poor, the young and the old can love the same piece of music. It is used to teach such as the alphabet song. It is amazing to be at a concert and see so many people appreciating the same music I enjoy. It can unite us. For most people music in some form is a daily part of their life.

Does music create spiritual experiences? One of the ironies for me about this question is that I will use words and not music to discuss the spirituality of music. I will be addressing your brain and not your heart. So even though music is something we feel, to present some concepts I am using words because I don't know how to speak in music.

For the starting point on the spirituality of music I will define what spirituality means to me. I think Phil's and Ronn's talks did a good job of describing spirituality so I'll use some excerpts from their presentations.

Phil said "I know it when I feel it; A heightened reality, an intuitive feeling, a deep appreciation, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of awe or wonder, the feeling of being in love, deep gratitude, a sudden realization that a story resonates for me. All these and more seem spiritual to me."

Ronn said in his 2007 talk on "What is Spirituality?" that "spirituality is more easily felt than expressed, as in welcoming a newborn baby or saying our last goodbye to a loved one. I've sensed it hiking up a canyon in the fall colors, listening to a Rachmaninoff concerto, or stumbling into a differential equation that just fits some natural phenomenon. I've seen it in a toddler's curiosity and the selfless acts of a Good Samaritan. I feel it in my marriage. I see it in the hands and faces of this faith community.

Can music make us feel the sense of attachment to something larger than our self? Can it make us participants instead of just observers? Can it give us a deep sense of appreciation?

I think it can. Certain music has made me feel this connected feeling to something bigger than myself. I have this feeling in the core of my body that feels wonderful; that makes me feel so alive and happy to be alive. Listening to The Cannon in D Major by Johann Pachelbel makes me feel spiritual.

As I did my research on this topic I generated more questions than I answer. Some of the questions are:

Is the spiritual experience different for performers, composers and listeners?

Is there a type of music that is more successful with creating a spiritual experience?
Is it possible to have a spiritual experience from music written by artists that do not share your spiritual beliefs? or by very non spiritual artists?

Is the spiritual experience different for performers, composers and listeners? I thought of Janelle, Cal, Dan, Amy, Sam, Bruce and Bill and wondered how their experience as a musician is different from mine as a listener. In the old days before the radio and the stereo if you wanted to listen to music you pretty much had to make the music. Families would sit down after dinner and play their instruments and sing. Now most of us can listen to music without participating.

One resource I used to help me answer the question of the relationship of spirituality and music is the book "The Spiritual Significance of Music." The book editor, Justin St. Vincent, interviewed a diverse array of artists, musicians and professionals. The book contains about 100 of these interviews. The question he asked the musicians was "What do you believe is the spiritual significance of music?" In the prelude of the book St. Vincent says "Spirituality is about balancing an inner desire to appreciate more than what we see and hear in our natural reality. Spirituality resonates in how we respond to our internal and external environment. It relates to the body, mind, soul, and spirit. A sincere search for spirituality reflects a desire to find fulfillment and inner transformation. Spirituality is founded upon a framework of faith and values. This can be collective or individual, influenced by culture, education, environment, experience, family, friends, lifestyle, religion, theology, tradition and worldview.

St. Vincent's avoids the book being some kind of one-sided sermon from the Christian Music Scene by interviewing artists from a wide spectrum of believers, atheists and cynics, with a few Satanists thrown in for good measure.

The question "What do you believe is the spiritual significance of music?" is vague and does not mention God or religion and so leaves it up to the artist to use their own meaning of spirituality. Some of the artists don't use the term spirituality. Instead they use terms like a Powerful Emotional Response, others use names such as God, Allah, Yahweh, Satan, or some kind of universal force, or "something substantial in the universe". Ravi Shankar makes mention of "The highest mental orgasm."

While the editor did not make judgments on any of the essays I certainly did. One thing I found was that there was a big difference between the language used by the overtly Christian artists and the others. The contributors without a clearly stated or defined religion were more interesting because it seemed that they had more to say and a lot more variety on what they said. Many of them needed to start with their definition of spirituality and felt that the spiritual significance of music was subjective in nature and resonates with each person differently. The Christian artists seemed to be bound by a form of their own language, where 'spirituality' becomes 'God', 'spiritual music' becomes 'Worship'.

I found the book interesting because the essays do come from the artists perspective. I liked Jamie Catto's of 1 Giant Leap description of when he writes a song. When I write a song, I don't try and "think it up" any more than one tries to "think up" an idea. It just arrives mysteriously and we write it down. I might strum a guitar gently, listen, then imagine I hear a melody, unhurriedly try and hum it without losing it, also without pinning it down too fast. It's very

hard, in my experience, to write something good on purpose.” He says he has to allow himself to be receptive and not active and not let his mind write the song but allow a different part of his being do the creativity. He is saying that there is something outside of himself that he lets in to write the song.

-Kimba Arem, a music therapist said “Music seems to be a kind of bridge between the ethereal world of spirit and the world of matter.” She also commented on how similar the word hear is to the word heart. - Gerald Casale, bassist, vocalist, and co-founder for Devo said that "True spirituality seeks to re-unite a thread that connects all of us to the rest of life and, thus, brings us together." -And Craig Chaquico, former lead guitarist from Jefferson Starship says "It's invisible but can fill the room and inspire the heart." -William Clipman, a drummer said that for him Music originates in silence: so that stillness and space between the notes must be appreciated and performed every bit as much as the notes themselves in order for music to attain its truly spiritual dimension. - Victor Crowl the singer-songwriter believes that “Everything in life has rhythm and our bodies have rhythm. Music has been a part of every aspect of spirituality in all cultures throughout the world, whether that is religious or an innate sense of spirituality. Music provides for us an instant connection to something bigger and greater than us; something that links us back to our ancestors, to a time and place, to a feeling of love, comfort and belonging. It drives self-acceptance and contentment. Music can calm a wild beast, and it can cause us to have great reflection to the point of changing and improving our lives. When it comes down to it, ideally, that is what spirituality is about; improving the state of your fellow human being, yourself, and the community at large.”

I skimmed over the essays that said that music is the word of God or that said God was their inspiration for composing and ones with names like Atheist, a death metal band and the doom-metal band EYEHATEGOD. So....Did you enjoy Janelle’s prelude? Did any of you think of music by Bach during the moment of silence? If Bach was alive today composing with the same beliefs he held about sin, hell and Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation I would have skimmed over him. I would have trouble respecting his music. So I am glad he lived when he did so that I can enjoy and appreciate his music. I excuse his words because of the period his words were written. I think we can feel the spirituality of Bach’s music without needing to be touched by the actual words. So the answer to “Is it possible to have a spiritual experience from music written by artists that do not share your spiritual beliefs? or by very non spiritual artists?” is probably yes. We may miss some incredible music if we allow ourselves to be music snobs or intolerant of certain music.

Turning the question around, “Do very spiritual artists or artists with the same belief system that I have make music that gives me a spiritual experience?” Not necessarily. I worked very hard in the 70s to appreciate Ravi Shankar’s sitar music. After listening to it over and over again I could tolerate it. I went to a Philip Glass concert played by the Kronos Quartet in the 80s. Philip Glass had just finished composing a piece for the opening of the 1984 LA Olympics and I was excited about hearing more of his music. The concert contained music from his earlier years when he was very minimalistic and the best I can say is that it was interesting. I could not find the melody and the harmonics were not pleasant to my ear. Recently I found out that Ravi Shankar and Philip Glass worked together on a movie soundtrack. Figure. There is really exciting music out there and very enjoyable music which I like hearing over and over again but

it does not necessarily create spiritual feelings. When I hear a piece of music I know immediately if it gives me spirituality.

I think we will really miss out on some wonderful music or have our musical experience altered if we allow the composer's or musician's lifestyle to affect the way we feel about their music. If you have a favorite band and they played at George W. Bush's inauguration would you stop listening to them? If they played at President Obama's inauguration would you start listening to them?

Lyrics can be troublesome. What do you do when the music is great and the lyrics are well mediocre or even bad? You love the music and finally concentrate on the words and find them horrible or boring. The music may be ruined for you if you can't get past the words. As with Bach we can be touched by the music without needing to be touched by the words. Of course great music and great words would be perfect but then you have to have two things that are great. Orchestral pieces without titles like Beethoven's 9th Symphony are a better formula for me. I don't have a song title directing my thoughts and there are no words to ponder. It allows me more freedom, and I am not directed to specific experiences. I can feel the music and do not have to think about the meaning of words. I think the female alto voice is the most beautiful of all the voices and there are some fabulous voices out there. Another way to be able to listen to beautiful voices and melodies is to listen to them in other languages. Enya, the new age singer sings in 10 different languages, one of which is a made up one for the Lord of Rings sound track. Many of us can let tradition help us get past the words such as with the The Hallelujah Chorus by Handel we can enjoy singing and listening to it.

There is probably a formula of harmony, melody and rhythm that makes a piece of music more likely to give us a spiritual experience. I saw "What the Bleep do You Know" where quantum physics is used to explain our conscience reality. Quantum physics can probably be used to explain how music affects us. Maybe spirituality has a weight like 21 grams, the weight of the soul.

I heard the song Exodus in the seventies. It is the music I can always count on when I want to feel spiritual. I found while preparing for this talk that it was written by Ernest Gold for the movie Exodus and it got Best Soundtrack Album and Song of the year at the Grammy Awards in 1961. It also made #2 on the Billboard Singles Chart played by two pianists Ferrante and Teicher. That meant that a lot of people liked it. The first 10 notes and rhythm after the introduction caught me immediately. Maybe there is a formula of musical structure in a progression with a rhythm and harmony that produce spiritual feelings. Maybe there are certain vibrations that stimulate our dopamine centers. Although I am not very interested in learning about the science of spirituality I hope that I can accept that science without it affecting my experiences of spirituality.

My take home message is:

Remember that the spirituality of music is subjective and affects each person differently

Listen to music – participate appreciate

Play an instrument or sing - participate

Keep yourself open to different genres of music

Feel the heart connection and keep the head out of it. (Don't analyze your feelings.) You will know when you are feeling spirituality.

I'll end with rereading Victor Crowl's words. Music provides for us an instant connection to something bigger and greater than us; something that links us back to our ancestors, to a time and place, to a feeling of love, comfort and belonging. It drives self-acceptance and contentment. Music can calm a wild beast, and it can cause us to have great reflection to the point of changing and improving our lives. When it comes down to it, ideally, that is what spirituality is about; improving the state of your fellow human being, yourself, and the community at large.

FYI

History on UUs and Hymns.

In the early 1800s, Unitarian congregations had little in the way of music. If they sang at all they sang biblical psalms that had been put to music by their Puritan ancestors. On the other side of our heritage, the Universalists were more musical, said the Rev. David Johnson, who is writing a book on the history of Unitarian and Universalist hymnody. "The Universalists were very enthusiastic singers from the beginning," said Johnson, former longtime minister at First Parish in Brookline, Massachusetts, and now interim minister at the UU Meeting House of Chatham, Massachusetts.

"The Universalists sang about God's love for everyone, very pointed evangelical hymns. When the Unitarians began writing and singing hymns, theirs were more graciously theological, celebrating nature and the bond between God and humankind," said Johnson. Neither faith had choirs in the beginning. "The Universalists all sang, and they didn't see any need for a separate choir."

By a certain point the Unitarians were trying desperately to sing well, he said. They had several periods of prolific hymn writing. The introduction to *The Unitarian Faith in Unitarian Hymns*, a collection of hymns published around 1915 by the American Unitarian Association, reflects one of these periods: "It is a significant fact that every period of spiritual awakening in the Christian church should have been marked by a fresh outburst of hymnody. . . . For the most part the older hymns no longer truly represent the mood of the new day."

Choral singing is the most popular form of participation in the performing arts for both adults and children. There were 22 million singers in the US in 2003 and today there are 32 million.

[The Spiritual Significance of Music](#). First Edition. Copyright 2009 by Justin St. Vincent. Published by Extreme Music.