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SPIRITUALITY AND MUSIC

Marcel Cobussen

Music and spirituality

It often seems as though the two main terms, “music” and “spirituality,” are not only pre-established, defined in advance, and thereby ready to be placed in relation to one another, but they also seem to suggest a certain unequivocal, unambiguity, and comprehensibility. However, these assumptions might perhaps be the core problem, especially when the topic is spirituality. Precisely the claim that something like spirituality is definable, that is, articulable in words, expressible in language, might confront us with a withdrawal of exactly that which is subject to definition. Is another sign system, music, perhaps better equipped to enable access to spirituality? If the question can be answered in the affirmative, the next question might be: through *which* music can we encounter spirituality? Can we simply presuppose a relationship between spirituality and *any* music? Or is there a particular “spiritual music”? And what is music anyway? Let us enter the discourse here, with a brief discussion on the concept of music, and proceed to a reflection on the term “spiritual music.”

At least since 1952, we have had to accept that music cannot be defined anymore on the basis of some set of intrinsic musical characteristics alone. In that year, *John Cage*’s most famous and controversial work *4’33”* premiered in Woodstock, New York, as part of a recital of contemporary piano music. The audience saw David Tudor sitting at the piano and closing the keyboard lid to mark the beginning of the piece’s first movement. To mark its end, he opened the lid again. This process was then repeated for the second and third movements.

Besides the revelation that silence does not exist, *4’33”* also accomplished a rather rigorous redefinition of music: as all the sounds present within the set timeframe of 4 minutes and 33 seconds together formed the music, it became evident that parameters such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and musical structure were at most secondary. Music came to be primarily defined in terms of duration, taking place within a certain timeframe. The role of the composer changed from one of prescribing particular notes to the performer to one of solely demarcating the beginning and end of a musical piece; “everything” occurring between the beginning and the end became music.

In other words, what music *is* depends on the context in which sounds are presented. The fact that *4’33”* took place during a recital of contemporary music, that it has three movements (analogous to the classical sonata structure), that it was performed by a renowned pianist, in

short, that it was presented *as* music, helped it to become accepted as music, first by the in-crowd, and later by (almost) all music scholars.

However, as soon as we start adding an adjective to music, the suggestion is made that this music has one or more particular characteristics which distinguishes it from other music: just as popular music is not classical music, Korean music is not Moroccan music, and soft music is not noise, “spiritual music” is not “non-spiritual” music. Affixing the word “spiritual” to music immediately suggests that music with innate spiritual qualities exists. This simultaneously implies that there is also “non-spiritual” music, music with no spiritual elements or music that cannot bring us into contact with the spiritual. Instead of giving, here and now, concrete content to this adjective “spiritual,” let us briefly discuss some specific music that can often be considered as having spiritual powers.

Spiritual music

Although the music of *J.S. Bach* often implies a complete alignment between religious and spiritual music, this is an inference I absolutely would like to avoid. Although Bach’s famous statement that “music’s only purpose should be the glory of God and the refreshment of the human spirit” bespeaks a deep faith, it is the music itself that directly expresses this faith and often seems to evoke spiritual experiences. Even staunch adversaries of institutionalized religion, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, heard the profound spiritual powers of Bach’s sacred as well as secular music. Others have tried to disentangle its almost otherworldly beauty by pointing at the number symbolism behind the overarching compositional structures as well as the musical details (e.g. van Houten and Kasbergen 1985). Others again claim that “Herr, unser Herrscher” (“Lord, our ruler”) – the opening chorus of the *St. John Passion*, with its recitatives coming from the midst of the New Testament narrative and the stern, stately chorales calling out from the era of Luther – with its striking dissonances and rhythmic vitality, its contrapuntal rigor and insolent breaking of compositional conventions, directly conveys Christ’s majesty and vitality.

While Bach’s Lutheran-based spirituality is widely acknowledged, other composers in the Western classical tradition are also noted for their overt ties to spirituality. *Olivier Messiaen* considered his music as a “breakthrough toward the beyond.” This should not be understood as an orthodox representation of the (in this case) Roman-Catholic faith through the medium of music but, rather, as a musico-sacred or sacro-musical “event,” referring to the delimitations or demarcations of the borders between music and the spiritual (Van Maas 2012). Messiaen himself indicated several moments in his music where such a breakthrough could be experienced, thereby implying that the spiritual in music can indeed be traced back to specific music-technical rules and laws and thus legitimizing an ontological difference between spiritual and non-spiritual music.

Moving away from Western classical music to the relationship between spirituality and Afro-American jazz or improvised music could take us to the saxophone player *Albert Ayler*. Between 1964 and 1965, Ayler composed works with titles such as “Spiritual Unity,” “Holy Holy,” “Spirits Rejoice,” “Angels,” and “Prophet,” which, as David Toop (2016, 66) writes, “envision music as mediumistic, incantatory, a channel of communication through to the unearthly.” Here we can hear a completely different breakthrough than in Messiaen. As Ayler says, “a divine harmony [...] that would go beyond what they used to call harmony” (Toop 2016, 66), leaving behind the orthodoxies of musical rules and leading into an atmosphere of possession and ecstasy. Ayler inhabited the sax to a point beyond its limits, screaming to the spirit, rising to exaltation, bursting through its mechanics and materiality into otherness.

While some jazz musicians rediscovered their gospel roots or embraced exotic world religions, pianist-bandleader *Sonny “Sun Ra” Blount* was a cosmology unto himself. While fusing the stride piano playing of early twentieth-century jazz with modern noise music, free improvisations, fusion, and more, he simultaneously developed himself as a philosopher and mystic. Averring that he was an alien from Saturn on a mission, a spiritual journey, to preach peace, he combined ancient Egyptology, mythic themes, cabalism, Afro-American liturgy, science fiction, and fringe esoterica into a unified conception within which his music and performances played an integral part.

From Negro Spirituals to so-called New Age music; from *Ravi Shankar* and *Snatam Kaur* to *Tōru Takemitsu* and *La Monte Young*; from Tuvan throat singing to the Sardinian “Cantu a Tenore”; from *Sly and the Family Stone* to *Magma* – also outside the domains of Western classical, jazz, and improvised music – numerous spiritual orientations, evocations, inspirations, and affirmations form sources from which music is composed, performed, and/or listened to.

Grateful Dead drummer *Mickey Hart* described his experiences of Sly and the Family Stone concerts as seductive, hypnotic, and intoxicating because of the ongoing groove. For Hart, their concerts were a music-spiritual ritual leading to a “kind of a religious experience in a Vegas lounge setting” (Toop 2016, 201). The meditative drone music of La Monte Young is rarely performed or recorded, as he requires a kind of spiritual initiation and complete dedication from the performers. “The Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer,” a composition lasting some 90 minutes, consists of only four tones; a change of tone only takes place after performers and audience experience the deeper, spiritual qualities of that tone. The music of the French band Magma mainly tells stories about a made-up planet Kobaïa, sung in a made-up language called Kobaïan. Magma’s performances have led to a distinct sub-genre of music, called “Zeuhl Wortz,” which is Kobaïan for “celestial” or “vibratory music of the universal might,” incorporating elements of progressive rock, jazz, classical, avant-garde, trance, and opera.

The question is if all this music has something in common, if they share the “same” spirituality. Do they somehow express various aspects of one spirituality? Or do they reveal many, even contradictory, spiritualities? I have argued elsewhere (Cobussen 2008) that there is no such thing as “spiritual music.” Just as the difference between musical sounds and non-musical sounds cannot be established (anymore) on the basis of intrinsically musical elements, there is no ontological separation possible between so-called “spiritual music” and “non-spiritual music.” In other words, I argue that “the spiritual” takes place in a space between music and listener. Specific experiences that take place during these encounters are sometimes called spiritual, and these spiritual encounters arise quite independently of the type, style, or genre of music.¹

From spiritual music to spiritual experience

The conclusion that there are no intrinsic musical characteristics through which spiritual music can be distinguished from non-spiritual music seems justifiable. It is hard to maintain that the music of Bach, Ayler, and Magma have sufficient similarities that could serve to legitimize such a claim. However, let us beware of an over-hasty inference.

In the early 2000s, the psychologist Richard Wiseman and the acoustic scientist Richard Lord experimented with a 23-foot (7-meter) pipe, which produced ultralow frequencies, and tested its impact on 750 people at a concert in London. Music by, among others, *Philip Glass*, *Arvo Pärt*, and *Claude Debussy* was sometimes laced with the drone of the pipe. The test subjects were not aware of this: they were not told, and the drone was inaudible. The lowest sound a human being can perceive with the auditory center is approximately 20 hertz, whereas the pipe’s buzz was at 17 hertz. What Wiseman and Lord discovered was that adding these infrasounds to the music significantly increased the arousal of all kinds of strange sensations in the audience:

frissons, odd feelings in the stomach, shivers down the spine, feelings of intense grief, memories of an emotional loss, awareness of “a presence,” and so on (Angliss 2003a; 2003b).

This experiment could lead to the hypothesis that, for example, infrasounds emanating from church organs are the main reason that churchgoers are sometimes overwhelmed by spiritual feelings. There is a high probability that some of the organ pipes in any large cathedral are so-called “32-footers.” The longest of these pipes are over 8.5 meters long, which means that they will produce infrasounds, too low to be really heard, but certainly perceivable on a non-aural level. According to Wiseman and his colleagues, when experiencing the sensations evoked by infrasounds, the body starts feeling odd, and the brain tries to come up with a convincing explanation, one of these “explanations” being “a spiritual experience” (Angliss 2003).

If this hypothesis holds, what does it mean for the general idea about spirituality and the relation between music and the spiritual? If the spiritual does not reside in musical techniques but might indeed have a physical or physiological basis, this might be considered as a disillusioning, an unmasking of a metaphysical and transcendental belief. However, I would rather consider it an opening toward a less dogmatic or orthodox concept of spirituality, no longer recognizable as a spirituality “as we knew it,” yet still calling for its vocabulary. Perhaps one could name it “material spirituality” or “spiritual materialism,” if only for the simple reason that spirituality requires a medium to come into existence, to somehow materialize.

This spiritual materialism contains at least three elements that are often neglected in current discourses: *first*, spirituality has a corporeal component – it is by triggering the body that sensations emerge which can be called “spiritual”; *second*, the spiritual in relation to music can be taken out of its (pseudo-)religious context (e.g. by moving it from the church to the concert hall), thus opening a possibility for thinking it in connection to “the everyday” instead of secluding it from daily experiences; *third*, the move from music to (infra-)sound, from mere musical sounds to the broader realm of sounds per se, discloses a more inclusive thinking about spiritual soundscapes: spiritual experiences often take place in broader sonic environments. Below, I will elaborate more on these three elements in order to flesh out this idea of a spiritual materialism.

Everyday spirituality. With or without the help of infrasound, the research referred to above could lead to the consideration that music not immediately related to spirituality, religion, otherworldliness or transcendental events, can perfectly well evoke sensations or experiences which can be described as spiritual. If we consider a spiritual experience as an encounter with “something” that cannot be grasped by rational explanation, conceptualization, and classification, this would lead to the idea that music’s power to evoke spiritual experiences can no longer be exclusively claimed by music commonly labelled as religious or spiritual.

Paraphrasing Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “Notes on the Sacred,” the spiritual enters into a novel matrix with the ordinary – in this case, ordinary, secular, non-spiritual music. Also “ordinary” music offers a point of access to the spiritual. Nancy (2013, 153) therefore describes the spiritual as “one of the nomadic folds of the ordinary.” For him, there lies a potentiality for spiritual encounters within the simplest exchanges, “provided there is an exchange, a transformation, an alteration, something other than a transaction” (Nancy 2013, 155). In other words, the spiritual is an encounter with the unfamiliar within the familiar, an encounter with strangeness within the ordinary, the unknown within the known, a disturbance introduced into the homogeneity of the world, however, without ever being identifiable or nameable: it simply befalls us (Nancy 2013, 156–157).

Unsurprisingly Nancy suggests that art proceeds from such a disturbance:

Practices we classify today under this rubric [art, MC] divert themselves from the course of the world. They suspend participation in the continuity of the homogeneous. They step aside [...] This suspension or impetus, this attention that evades every

occupation, that is only concerned with itself, is devoted to the approach of an outside – but an outside that is open in the midst of the world. In strokes, in noise, marks, imprints or movements.

(Nancy 2013, 157–158)

However, this artistic disturbance cannot be produced deliberately; it can never be the causal result of a conscious choice or clear intention. An artwork may carry necessary but no sufficient conditions for such a disturbance. To get access to it, without exactly knowing how, requires labor, effort, and attention: to be attentive to getting disturbed (Nancy 2013, 158).

Nancy seems to confirm the idea that the spiritual does not reside in any attribute of (any) music; neither is it a pure activity of the mind, nor (necessarily) connected to the transcendental or otherworldly; an encounter with music – any music, any sound even – might be called “spiritual” when it somehow evokes a transformation, an alteration, disturbing the homogeneous. If spirituality is thus what touches us most intimately, unexpectedly, and without preparation, it can be experienced in Justin Bieber’s cheesy pop tunes as well as in J.S. Bach’s Passions, in John Coltrane’s frantic solos as well as in Arvo Pärt’s tranquil compositions, but also in rustling leaves, bird song, or extreme noise. The spiritual *happens*; it happens, unannounced, (also) in our encounters with sound and music.

Corporeal spirituality. The sonically spiritual touches us – (also) literally; we are moved – (also) literally; it affects us. According to Gilles Deleuze (2003), affect is an autonomous reaction of a body when confronted with a particular perception. Initially, this affect has no meaning or signification, because it is entirely physical, an energetic movement caused within the body. (See the sensations reported by the test subjects in Wiseman and Lord’s research.) Perhaps one could even maintain that the disturbance Nancy (2013) writes about takes place first of all at an unconscious or pre-conscious, embodied level. That (musical) sounds elicit direct bodily responses – frisson, chills, goosebumps – is called “sonic strokes” by music philosopher Vincent Meelberg:

A stroke can be a slap, but a caress as well. Therefore, a sonic stroke can be a sound that has an impact on the listener’s body because of its volume [...]. Also, a sound can be a sonic stroke because it sounds very softly, or because it has a particular timbre or rhythm that, in some way, arouses the listener, for instance because it is surprising in a particular manner.

(Meelberg 2009, 325)

Of course, the body is literally touched by sounds, since sound waves touch the eardrum and make it move. Sounds that penetrate us through the ear propagate their effects throughout the entire body; sounds vibrate, and they make the ear and body vibrate too. As with infrasounds, extreme noise enters directly into the body, more felt than heard, engaging the body as a huge membrane, as a sensible thing. It eradicates verbal communication, grabs the body instantaneously, and works as an anesthetic. As Salomé Voegelin (2010: 47) writes, “the body of sound has moved so close it *is* my body”; listeners can only abandon themselves to its materiality, physically inundated by its assault. Noise demands corporeal involvement; it deprives listeners of the safe distance that is maintained in so many other encounters with music; it deprives listeners of a structural, analytical, intellectual listening; it deprives listeners of the presumed certainty of language with which they can critically engage music; they can only surrender to and accept the sonic strokes.

What does noise have to do with spirituality? Can we encounter spirituality in or through noise? Can we think of spirituality as an event that can (only) be felt, felt by our bodies, instead of depending on a specific state of mind? The proposal for a material spirituality aims to reclaim rarefied spiritual experiences and encounters for the concrete reality of the flesh of the material world (Finn 1996, 153). A material spirituality, invoked, for example, by extreme noise, rejects the separation, the hiatus between spiritual and material being: through music, through sound, it becomes possible to think another spirituality, a spirituality that does not refer to a being beyond the material world, but to a being beyond categorical frameworks, beyond significance, beyond coding and decoding, beyond control and understanding (Finn 1996, 161).

A transformation, an alternation through art, through music, through a sonic stroke – that is how Nancy (2013) described the manifestation of the spiritual. A spiritual experience – that is how the audience, during the concert in London, apprehended the physical sensations enhanced by (inaudible) sonic strokes. Through bodily sensations – triggered by the exposure to noise which sets aside the controlling mind – a transformation, a disturbance, manifests itself which might be called “spiritual.”

Spiritual soundscapes. In addition to the five “scapes” with which anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1990) mapped out, the complex order of a contemporary global cultural economy – ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes, and ideoscapescapes – scholars of religious studies have recently added “religioscapescapes,” essentially referring to the distribution in space of physical manifestations of religious traditions (Hayden and Walker 2013; McAlister 2005; Turner 2008). Focusing on contemporary presentations of religious music in non-religious spaces, Dutch theologians Mirella Klomp and Marcel Barnard recently coined the term “sacro-soundscapes.” In contemporary Western societies, performances of Passions, Requiems, Masses, and Stabat Maters have moved out of the institutionalized church into secular cultural domains, even into public spaces, often concurrent with popular culture and commerce, thus turning them into real media events (Klomp and Barnard 2017). The essay becomes especially interesting when the authors – if only for a very brief moment – think beyond the mere musical realm by claiming that sacro-soundscapes consist of

a whole complex of sacred sounds, their words and music, the way they are performed and accompanied, the context in which they are performed, the way they are appropriated, and the attributed meanings that people share [...] beyond the church, beyond institutionalized religion, and possibly even beyond religion.

(Klomp and Barnard 2017)

The term “spiritual soundscape” – which I prefer over Klomp and Barnard’s sacro-soundscape, as it avoids too much emphasis on religious music, with its close ties to Christendom and therefore to transcendentalism – primarily refers to a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. The term designates the spiritual relationship of (human) beings and their sonic environments; it acknowledges the crucial role sounds play and have played in spiritual experiences and rituals. Whether considered music(al) or not, this should also include the role of church bells; the voice of the muezzin; the drums, hand clapping, and foot stamping that not only accompany but also make possible certain shamanistic trance rituals; natural sounds such as thunder and storm, long considered the voice of (a) god; the solemn or muttering voices of monks; the mix of ritual, happening, show, and concert of bands such as Magma, Sunn O))), and the Sun Ra Arkestra; the flapping of prayer flags; etc. Music is perhaps just the one of the more prominent “soundmarks” of a spiritual soundscape.

What also needs to be taken into account are the places and spaces within which these sounds affect us: the silent monastery, the reverberating church, the villages or cities in which bells and calls for prayer resonate, the concert hall with its dimmed lights, the nightly forest, the submarine environment with its specific reverberations, the overwhelming bigness of a stadium packed with singing supporters, the electronic dance music venues with their immersive light shows, the empty desert, the echoing cave, up to the megalopolis with its extensive noises or the intimate seclusion of a darkened bedroom.

The spiritual soundscape encompasses and exceeds mere musical sounds; it may not even contain sounds that are customarily regarded as musical. And, in fact, any soundscape can, in principle, become a spiritual soundscape when the sonic experiences and sensations taking place there are deemed spiritual.

Conclusion

Writing the last parts of this essay during the Holy Week, I cannot avoid not listening to one of J.S. Bach's Passions. I cannot be not touched by "Erbarme dich," even after having heard it countless times. I cannot be not drawn into the dialogue between voice, violin, and basso continuo. For a few minutes, the world consists only of beautiful melodies and harmonies upon which I can simply float.

Walking through a forest on Good Friday, I hear the burble of a creek. I remember David Toop calling it "phantom voices." He is right: listen closely and one hears conversations or monologues in a language that perpetually eludes meaning. It reminded him of a study on ancient Greek oracles by Robert Flacelière: natural sounds were attributed spiritual or divine influences because they could not be controlled (Toop 2010, 94). I allow myself to be carried away by the plashing sounds until I lose all sense of time and space.

I listen to a live version of "Almost Cut My Hair" by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, recorded in 1974. For almost eight minutes I become completely immersed in the rather slow groove and repetitive harmonies, hypnotized and bewitched by David Crosby's raspy and powerful voice, a convincing mixture of emotional passion and technique, as well as Neil Young's gut-wrenching, yowling guitar solo. The music literally gives me goosebumps and sends shivers down my spine. Afterwards, I feel cleansed, strong, warm.

I run through the bustling city to catch a train. Suddenly, my mind registers the imperturbable, monotonous, thumping sounds of pile driving. I slow my pace, stand still, and listen more attentively. After a while, I start hearing many more nuances in the sounds: the first hit, the echoes, the subsequent rising tone, the wind audibly influencing the spatiality of the sounds, the palimpsest of pitched and non-pitched sounds, (imaginary) rhythmic patterns. The sonic strokes enter my body; I can neither control them nor make them cease. Their perpetuity renders them meaningless.

These are four rather arbitrary moments during which an encounter with music, with sound, with a soundscape has taken place and can be called "spiritual." These moments may also function as cautious steps toward an everyday, corporeal, and material spirituality, invoked by sounds. Many more steps need to be taken ...

Note

- 1 Using this cautious description is intentional. Recent psychological research has indicated that worldview, sensibility for suggestion and influence, mentalization, and sensitivity for presence detection determines to a large extent whether a certain event is marked as spiritual or not. People who call themselves spiritual are more likely to have spiritual experiences than, say, atheists.

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