Music and Spirituality: An Auto-Ethnographic Study of How Five Individuals Used Music to Enrich Their Soul

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Abstract: This paper presents a study of the experiences of five individuals who explore their unique relationship between music and spirituality. Each participant critically narrates their faith and beliefs and explores how these relate to their experiences with music. The paper begins with a brief exposition of the literature concerning music and spirituality and the linkages between the two. The methodology combines narrative and auto-ethnography, underpinned by a phenomenological approach to reflection on experiences. Using deep self-analysis, the five authors derive and discover lessons concerning their own relationship between faith, spirituality, and music. These are then analysed to produce common themes concerning the intertwining of spirituality with music. Finally, the conclusions present a novel contribution which includes lessons on how through self-exploration, one can use music and spirituality to repair and ultimately enrich the soul. The paper exposes the interplay between faith, spirituality and music, which will be of general interest and provide inspiration to those who intend to use music to enrich their lives and heal themselves.

Keywords: music; spirituality; narrative; auto-ethnography; phenomenology; thematic; experiences; religion; healing; growth

1. Introduction

This paper explores the linkages between music and spirituality in relation to narratives of growth and change in the lives of a group of individuals. In this study, we present narratives of individuals (the authors of the paper themselves) who have used music to enrich, and in some cases heal, their soul. The methodological approach is a combinatorial one of narrative (McAdams 2012), auto-ethnography (Ellis et al. 2011), and reflection (Gibbs 1988). Each author discusses their faith and the paths that they took to explain how this became intertwined with music and thus helped them form a deeper meaning of their spirituality. The individuals represent a diverse mix of cultural, faith, age, (dis)ability, and gender contexts. In each case, these different dimensions of diversity and individuality impact their spiritual journey through music. Similarly, the music that shapes the participants’ journeys covers a spectrum of musical forms from singing, instrumental playing, sacred and secular music, through classical music to rock music. Some individuals produce the music themselves (Boyce-Tillman 2016), whilst others listen to music or attend performances (Galbraith 2014). This rich, patchwork texture of spiritual experiences presents powerful accounts of the intersection of music and spirituality and contributes to the understanding of how music can enrich the people’s own interpretation of the soul.
This is achieved through a process of examining what it means to be critically reflective regarding one’s own spiritual journey as it relates to music.

2. Literature Review

The relationship that unites people, music and well-being is not new: indeed, it has been understood and practised in diverse ways and through diverse human experiences across history (Elliott and Silverman 2017). The notion of affecting one’s inner life through cultural forms may be in multiple bodies of theory: psychoanalytically, for example, Jung was very clear that the soul needs tending, and that this could be achieved through a conscious critique of introspection and meditation toward a goal of ‘individuation’ (Jung 1956) or drawing outward experiences into oneself. In addition, neurobiologically speaking, the richness and diversity of the spiritual mind has been linked to the musical cultures in which experiences occur and which question the physical and materialist basis of both consciousness and spirituality (Kelly et al. 2009). The drawing of the outside world inwards and the synthesis of multiple art forms and experiences reflect contemporary social and cultural traditions (Horden 2017; Gouk 2017; Gioia 2011). In parallel, spirituality and spirituality-oriented care support both mental health and physical wellness (Vincensi 2019).

According to Berry (2009), spirituality is frequently conceptualised as one of the dimensions, albeit a critically important one, that simultaneously connect one to the universe as well being a universal phenomenon that echoes yet responds to our uniquely individual human characteristics and experiences of the world about us. According to Berry (2009), definitions of the two have evolved in the spirituality literature over the past two decades, with some authors suggesting that spirituality is the individual journey to develop an intra-personal relationship with others and with the environment. In contrast, religion might be conceived of as a more formal and communal journey which includes mutual sacred space, text, values, and beliefs (Zinnbauer et al. 2015). This is not to say that such a relationship is not complex, nor to suggest that spirituality may be conceived as a catch-all term for any experience that is related to understanding and mediating one’s experience of suffering and of difficulty.

However, if spirituality, in whatever form, is central to finding meaning and purpose in life, then music is the mediator of such goals, and participation in communal music activities may act as an inner resource toward a journey of revealing an authentic self. The journey toward the authentic self through musical community is, importantly, a central tenet of music therapy: according to Stern (2004), attunement within a therapist–client relationship resembles an uncovering of authenticity as an individual’s inner motivations emerge and the ability to articulate them increases in rhythm with the therapist’s direction. De Bäcker (2004) asserts that this is the greatest paradox of music as a vehicle for therapy—it can generate an independent spiritual experience, but principally when the music is an object shared with an individual or a group. Arguably, then, music could be uniquely placed through its ability to both heal (music as therapy) and to grow (music in therapy) (Thaut 2015). However, this duality has led to some unfortunate outcomes in terms of its value as a source of well-being; the need for it to be validated as a credible therapeutic process together with the patients who need to be ‘healed’ has led to music, when used for this purpose, being conflated with ‘othering’ and as a type of deficit response to trauma and illness (Landis-Shack et al. 2017). This has been exacerbated by developments in the last decade related to the expansion of diagnoses of mental health while mental health provision has shrunk in terms of investment in comparison with most countries’ health budgets (Fahy et al. 2023). As such, the well-being benefits of music have largely become arguably too readily associated with marginalized groups of people who are not offered any other treatment options (Landis-Shack et al. 2017). However, other researchers argue that this is not the case, and that music is now able to help individuals who remain otherwise invisible to medical professionals and whom society has pathologized rather than empowered to grow because of musical experiences (Bohart 2000). The ‘new age’ alignment of such musical developments has not escaped scrutiny; however, many traditional academic disciplines are
reluctant to engage with themes of healing and therapy (Lambert 2013), lest they somehow undermine the critical scholarship of conceptual and disciplinary knowledge bases (Rorke 2001). These papers reveal that there is room for systematic, multidisciplinary work within the fields of music and religion, and the narratives within this paper expose the multiplicity of meanings that academic analysis of empirically founded data has produced. This paper, therefore, is a rich seam of evidence that may be used to further our understanding that music and religion may give rise to an increasingly wide spectrum of reflection on the intersection of human experience and spirituality.

3. Methodology

The overarching philosophical approach within this paper is that of phenomenology (Eberle 2014). Phenomenology is the philosophical study of subjectively lived experiences. The application of phenomenology helps us to gain a deeper understanding of subjective experience. Our methodology is a narrative account (McAdams 2012) combined with auto-ethnography (Ellis et al. 2011) and reflection (Gibbs 1988). The narrative subjects within the paper are the authors of the paper. Each author narrates their own experiences using music to explore their spirituality. Auto-ethnography is a form of research in which the individual uses their lived experiences. They then refer to the literature to see how these experiences mirror and connect to wider cultural, political, and social meaning. We recognise the limitations of such an approach as some of our experiences are from the significant past, and memory may impact such narratives (Adamczyk and Zawadzki 2020). Indeed, Salzman (2002) argues that any analysis of reflective narrative accounts should be treated with scepticism, and Bishop and Shepherd (2011) question the ethics of this approach for the same reasons. However, we feel that the power of our experiences and the way in which we have linked these to the literature outweighs these limitations (Bist and Smith 2021). Our study, as a narrative auto-ethnographic study, does, however, possess ethical complexity. Whilst we do not and did not have the challenge of accessing communities as standard ethnography does, we placed ourselves at the centre of this study and thus exposed incidents and experiences to a significant degree of scrutiny (Lester and Anders 2018). This is a potential difficulty of such work, since Lee (2018) for example, claims that “[t]he auto-ethnographer strives to achieve a version of the self and an account of events that is consistent and acceptable to their own conscience” (p. 313). We argue that the strength of our multiple-narratives approach in which we were able to question and critique each other’s narrative was able to balance the sense of presenting ideal versions of ourselves, and this was particularly the case because conceptually, our stories emanated from different cultural and temporal contexts.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these criticisms, auto-ethnographic studies have significant methodological value in that they use personal experience to expose cultural norms and encounters. Auto-ethnography reveals the characteristics and attributes of a cultural group for the dual purpose of helping both insiders (the cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) to appreciate and deeper understand a culture (Allen-Collinson 2013). For this paper, there is also another very salient purpose of auto-ethnography, and that is to expose very personal narratives from the authors to inquire into the sociological structures that shape and scaffold their experiences (Sparkes 2000). According to Ellis et al. (2011), auto-ethnography constitutes work that traverses several fields, most notably adopted in sociological, political, and cultural contexts but critically, using stories of ‘the self’ that are interrelated with these contexts and lead to a deep understanding of one’s subjective lived experience.

In relation to the study’s philosophical underpinning and how this translated to practical action, we choose to follow the original approach to phenomenology as proposed by Husserl, which enables us to explore “transcendental” or in our case spiritual experiences (Husserl and Moran 2012). The decision to adopt Husserl’s phenomenology is an important one in this study, since it exposes some critical issues about how we conducted the study and our auto-ethnographic accounts. Bracketing is a core concept in Husserlian phenomenology,
but it is also contested as a design and process (Fischer 2009), frequently because it is seen as unattainable and esoteric when faced with the messy reality of lived experience. Bracketing is most often used as a means of demonstrating the validity of the data collection and analysis process (Ahern 1999), and within this, researchers are expected to put aside their sum of knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences to faithfully and accurately represent participants’ lived experiences. However, many studies have reported the lack of clarity of researchers’ actions and processes in adopting bracketing (Chan et al. 2013) and asserted that the absence of a concrete description of it leads to questions of methodological validity.

In this paper, we considered such questions carefully and decided to face the complex issues in two ways. First, we wrote our individual narratives before consulting the literature. Hamill and Sinclair suggest that this is helpful in not generating experiences to unconsciously fit with the themes from literature. Second, we adopted transpersonal reflexivity to continually interrogate our experiences (Lancaster 2023), in which all the authors systematically reflected first on the subject under study and subsequently examined their self-reflections, questioning the degree to which each was rooted both in conscious awareness as well as somatic awareness. As a result, in this study, we tackled the transcendental and consequent bracketing practices head-on and set them in an interpretive case study framework that bridged the need to bracket with a method of achieving this—the adoption of transpersonal reflexivity (Dörfler and Stierand 2021) within our auto-ethnographic accounts.

4. Data Collection

Despite the clear intertwining of music and culture, auto-ethnographic studies of musical experience and spirituality are limited in number (Boyce-Tillman 2016), and where they do exist, they privilege the deficit and physiological bodily responses to music rather than examining the intellectual and psycho-social elements of such experiences (Braganza and Oliveira 2022). Therefore, this paper was designed to utilize auto-ethnography to explore the phenomenon of spirituality and its relationship with music and culture, including a means of identity formation, exploration of identity, mediation between identity when it changes, and mediation between the spiritual and sensual life. The authors who have shared their personal stories are a group of friends. Some have worked together in the past and some have met through a mutual love of music. All the authors have been profoundly affected by music and have lived experiences of how music has supported and nourished them during challenging times. As individuals who are all engaged in other occupations but for whom music plays a central and critical role in their identity, the authors’ auto-ethnographic accounts identify a notion of ‘making sense’ of their experiences and of putting musical experiences into place within an architecture of spirituality. So, the paper begins with personal stories but ends with deep reflections on music and spirituality that are set within cultural interpretations.

The data for this paper were collected from the authors’ reflective writings, blogs, and informal field notes over the period 2021–2023. The self-reflections were carried out in a variety of modes: some were formal under headings from other frameworks (Jantsch 2019) and had headings such as ‘Incident’, ‘Context’, and ‘Action’, whilst others were storied accounts and incorporated elements of location, main actors, and protagonists. All the accounts, however, contained narrative in relation to their plot and setting; this is to say that they had biographical information, they contained elements of emplotment and setting, and above all, they espoused revelation and resolution. Examples of the authors’ writing are given in this paper, whereby the core of the writers’ narratives is presented to best illustrate both the coherence of the stories and the common theme of ‘making sense of music through spirituality’. The storied and self-recall process inherent to this stage implies questions of credibility and veracity due to the distorted and selective recall process, but it is for this reason that we as authors employed bracketing in our analytical stage and used specific techniques, as outlined earlier, to increase the integrity and fidelity of our accounts.
5. Data Analytical Methods

The autobiographical accounts were analysed in two ways: first, we constituted the storied accounts of each of the authors based on a typical narrative structure known as Labov’s model of structural analysis (Riessman 2008) first of the anchors of the story (a summary of main points); then the orientation (places, times, and characters); the complicating event (the main issue or incident that ‘causes’ the problem); the revelation or a justification of the story; and finally, the resolution and the interpretation that the writer gives and the turning of the story back to the original point. For the next stage of the analysis, we adopted what is known as the reiterative process (Ashby 2013). It is at this stage that the bracketing mostly took place and that we adopted transpersonal reflexivity to continually interrogate our experiences (Lancaster 2023). Within this, each of us employed self-observation and critical examination of our reality and critical reflection on the nature of ‘incidents’ and our possible reactions to and reflections on them. In other words, we critically questioned whether our interpretations were the only ones and whether we could resolve our narratives in a different way, thereby emerging with different resolutions. Whilst we carried out this process on our own individual narratives, we also followed the same procedure in relation to each other’s’ narratives too, so that we established a coherent framework for our overall findings and established a credible conclusion for the main concept within the paper—the intersection of music and spirituality.

6. Narratives and Analysis

In accordance with the Labovian model of structural narrative analysis, the findings of this study were categorized in relation to the notion of how each of the participants’ faith and belief systems interacted with their musical experiences. As such, the findings are presented as participants’ shortened and concentrated narrative experiences, followed by three main structural themes: The Privacy of Altering Experience; Self-Therapeutic Realisation; and Conscious Continuity.

**Dinesh**

Following a deep vein thrombosis, I started visiting a forest near my house, as the NHS consultant advised me not to be sedentary. I am not a singer and have never studied music, but I love listening. Good music can enhance human molecules of emotions (Pert 1999). I was given a karaoke mic at a family gathering, and it felt like I was in rhythm. My friends told me I sounded a bit melodious; the next week my wife gave me a gift—a karaoke machine—and now I enjoy being alone and singing and at times singing with friends.

The Sama Veda of Melodies and Chants in the Sanatan Dharma teaches us that the Divine Absolute, known as Brahman (Space), through the concepts of Śabda-Brahman (Sacred Sound as God) and especially Nāda-Brahman, comprises Nāda-Shakti (sound energy) and Brahman (Beck 2019). I believe for that reason that the folk singer or any singer practising in nature has a different voice tone to those singing in studios, as nature shapes their voice. Being in the forest for a long time affected my nervous, endocrine, and immune systems, known as the psycho-neuro-immune network for healing. Some research (for example Park et al. 2010) have stated that our nervous system affects the endocrine and immune system by releasing neurotransmitters through the hypothalamus. The endocrine systems affect the nervous and immune systems by secreting hormones. Early morning visits to the forest, without me consciously knowing, were working on my endocrine glands. The cooling calmness of forest was absorbed by my glands, meaning that the intelligence of the body was at play with nature. This calmness and cooling became electricity via my sense organs. The specialised cells of our body, called neurons, were transmitting that information to my brain, which instantly combined this new information with other data in my brain, such as a rush of cold air, a leaf falling on my feet or head, or feeling rain in the forest as I walked through the forest.

It is not surprising that Indian classical music has several ragas, especially for a particular time of the day, etc. For this reason, Sama Veda rooted its classical singing in
different hours of the day. On reflection, it feels like Devi Saraswati (Goddess of Knowledge) is guiding me. I did not know neuroscience, physiology and human anatomy. However, I have ended up reading 95-plus books in the last seven years about the human brain, physiology and anatomy; Ancient Sanatan Dharma texts; Upanishads; Vedant Sutra; The Bhagavad Gita and Sapanda (Vibration) Karika and Vedas; and several others. It feels as if nature or God guided me on what to read.

Laura

At the age of three, I was diagnosed with a rare form of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, Still’s disease. As well as effecting most of my joints, it became clear that the inflammation was also affecting my eyes. Over the next few years, I had many visits to the Sunderland Eye Infirmary at Saint Thomas’s Hospital in London and underwent several operations and clinical procedures, which were carried out at the Prince Charles Eye Unit in Windsor. Despite all these interventions, my sight grew worse and worse until, at the age of five, I was registered blind. By the age of ten, I had no sight at all. Growing up without sight presented many barriers and challenges on a practical, emotional, and spiritual level. Constructing my identity within an ableist world profoundly impacted how others viewed me and, ultimately, how I viewed myself. Indeed, societal perceptions of disability can significantly impact an individual’s sense of self as identity is largely shaped in response to cultural, societal, and political norms (MacDonald et al. 2013). As a child, it often felt to me that my teachers and peers had a predetermined, prescribed idea of who I was as a person before really getting to know me at all. My interests, opinions, desires, and capabilities were often assumed and projected onto me through an ableist gaze. This resulted in me experiencing a large gap between how I perceived myself and how others saw me. Although my disability has shaped my identity and life immeasurably, my own notion and construction of selfhood and what it means to be me is very much distinct and separate from my status as a person who is blind. Indeed, internally I am a confident, independent, capable, creative woman, mother, daughter, partner, and friend.

When interacting with the world around me, a combination of current social barriers and a lack of representation of people with disabilities has meant that, often, those who do not know me find it difficult to see beyond my disability and tend to rely on stereotypes, focusing on what I cannot do rather than what I can. This can often result in disabled people finding it difficult to find their own unique voice and make it heard (MacDonald et al. 2013). Shakespeare (2006) emphasises the importance of recognising disabled individuals as active agents in shaping their identities. All throughout my life I have loved to sing, and after performing in a school play at the age of 10, I became hooked on singing on stage. Even at that young age, I was aware that singing was not only a fun and creative outlet but also that it had a profound impact upon me emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. It created a space that I had never managed to find in any other area of my life, a space where my internal world was made external and the gap between how I perceived myself and how I was being perceived by others was lessened. I felt listened to in a way I had never quite felt listened to before. Frith (1996) speaks of the universal language of music, and, for me, I felt that singing conveyed important messages I was unable to convey elsewhere. The combination of my voice and the melody I was producing felt like a way of communicating the essence of who I felt I was, revealed my potential, and enabled others to see it too. Meizel (2020) outlines this process as a way that marginalised communities make their voice heard.

Matt

In 1996, I was born severely prematurely at 25 weeks old, weighing 1lb 12oz. Due to birthing complications, I suffer from cerebral palsy, a physical condition which impedes balance, coordination, and body movement (Morris 2002). Being physically disabled can be quite an isolating experience (MacDonald et al. 2013). Growing up, I often felt loneliness and experienced social exclusion in school, which stemmed from the views of primary school teachers who believed that because I was disabled, I would not amount to anything.
The only time I ever felt free from the constraints of my condition was when I was listening to or making music.

Ever since I can remember, I have been transfixed by music, the drums especially. From an early age, I sought to create rhythms and express myself by banging on pots and pans with whatever implements I could find, breaking my fair share of wooden spoons in the process, much to the chagrin of my family. Throughout my formative years, I found solace in the cathartic experience and stress release that came with striking a drum with a pair of sticks. Before the age of four, the complications of my disability were so severe that I had no use of my left hand; it hung there, almost lifeless. A chance encounter with a drummer in the local church began a physical healing process which involved gaining movement in my left hand. He asked if I could hold a drumstick in my left hand and attempt to hit the snare drum. I could! At the age of five, I began to play the piano; however, I quickly became disillusioned and decided to give up playing after one year of tuition. Despite this, I have continued to play the instrument, learning primarily by ear. After reading the encouraging results of Chong et al.’s 2013 study examining the effects of therapeutic instrument music performance (TIMP) for fine motor exercises in adults with cerebral palsy, which led to an enhancement of fine motor/finger functions for adults with cerebral palsy after piano training as the individuals who received the training could now strike the keys of the piano with greater force (Chong et al. 2013), I was inspired to dissect the mechanics of my piano playing and my physiology to try and increase individual finger movement on my left hand by practising piano triads in root, first, and second inversions, which led to increased dexterity and movement.

I was raised in a Christian household, and I continue to play an active role in the life of a local church as a drummer on the worship team. When I experienced loneliness and isolation, I found solace in my faith, and the church was a haven for me. It helped me develop socially and emotionally by integrating me into its community. It also furthered my musical abilities by allowing me to engage in music making with other church members. This collective music making can be a translational experience that affects me both emotionally and spiritually, creating a common appreciation of the Divine (Arnold 2019). One of the things I find to be of immense value in my church community is the diversity and integration it permits for disabled individuals; the church congregation includes individuals with various needs, ranging from autism and Down’s syndrome to deafness and blindness, who are all welcomed, treated with the utmost respect, and play a role in the rich tapestry of the life of the church. Once a month, our church runs a disco for adults with additional needs to help them socialise and build relationships.

Peter

In 2016, I experienced severe trauma and disability after a spinal cord injury. I always had a strange relationship with spirituality and faith. I was brought up in a strongly British Christian family and went to church every Sunday morning with my parents, as did many young people in the 1960s. As I grew older, I began to rebel against the (as I viewed it) strict, disciplinarian “rules” of the Anglican church, just as others did (for example, Yamaguchi 2007). I soon stopped going to church, and around the same time as I was awakened to the pop music of the times and in particular “She Loves You” by the Beatles (Lennon and McCartney 1963). I must have been 7 or 8 years old at the time. To say that my life changed the moment I heard that song is no understatement. It might as well have come from another planet. Thorn (2019) writes of similar experiences when first hearing the music of David Bowie during the 1970s. The lyrics, the tempo, the music, and John Lennon and Paul McCartney’s vocals were so different from anything I had heard before. Their music had a similar impact (Hecl 2006). Since the 1960s, I have attended 2000+ concerts, covering a range of genres from straight pop through to classic rock, punk rock, new wave, and reggae. The first concert I attended was by the Bonzo Dog Band, Roy Harper, Yes, and Mad Dog at the Sunderland Empire Theatre on 8th March 1969. I was 12 years old. Baxter-Moore and Kitts (2016) have written of the importance and impact of the first live concert experience...
for young people. I can still remember aspects of this gig more than 50 years later. I sat fascinated by the performers on stage and entranced by the loud music. The volume was a particularly important part of the experience for me; in a similar way, McKinnon (2010) discusses the importance of loud volume during heavy rock concerts. I was frightened that my hearing would be damaged, and yet I still enjoyed the power of the performance. I experienced something that one might term “euphoria” and sitting in the front row in a hall full of rock fans, I felt I was part of a common experience almost religious in its nature (Galbraith 2014). In that moment, I was enjoying a spiritual experience (Inglis 2017; Sylvan 2002) which I was to return to many times throughout my life.

I now believe that music and live performance have become entwined in my spiritual-ity and my soul (Bist and Smith 2021). Continuing to attend live concert performances after my accident has given me a purpose, alongside my family and continuing to write and work. I somehow feel “whole again” when I witness a live performance (Cowen et al. 2020). For a few short hours I can forget my disabilities. McKay (2013) explores the relationship between music and those with disabilities. My disabilities are no longer an issue; I am swept away by the live performance and how I connect with the artist on the stage. I tend to revisit artists who I have built a personal connection with over the years, performers who I have seen many times.

Caroline

Bartleet (2009) asserts that music can expand the creative possibilities of one’s auto-ethnography, thus opening it up to new meanings and interpretations. However, she also argues that conversely, auto-ethnography can offer individuals involved in music a means to reflect on their experiences in culturally insightful ways. These ideas provide fragments of understanding of my own experience of the interwoven worlds of music and spirituality.

My family background is interfaith, my father being a fervent Roman Catholic and my mother being a practising Modern Orthodox Jew. Both my mother and father had severe mental illness—my father had schizophrenia and was hospitalised many times as I was growing up. For him, music was both solace and salvation, to calm him when his world was unravelling (again) and to crowd out the voices of his psychosis when they became too loud. The music that he played endlessly on the record player reflected both kinds of turmoil—Bach’s St Matthew Passion for the all-consuming need to quieten his mind, and Chopin’s piano concertos to try and elevate his mental state into something more beautiful and divine rather than base and dreadful. The fact that he played these hundreds, possibly even thousands, of times as I was growing up made two impressions on me that have never shifted. The first is that music could indeed save a life—although my father tried to kill himself several times, the first thing he did when discharged from hospital was play his healing music. The experience of my mother during my childhood illustrates this point. My mother had bipolar disorder, and she, like my father, drew on her spirituality to both affect and mediate her mental state. Although in Orthodox Synagogues, women may not participate in communal expression of musical prayer because of the Talmudic injunction that limits the hearing of women’s voices (kol ishah) (Summit 2000), attending Synagogue was deeply therapeutic for both my mother and me. Partly, this was because we were able to access sacred music in a physically restricted and private environment (behind a mechitza—a screen dividing the men and women in an Orthodox synagogue), meaning we could express enjoyment, and I did not need to worry about what people were thinking about the fact that they were sure that I had been seen attending Mass on Sundays as well as Synagogue on Saturdays; this was powerful and liberating for me. Partly, it was also because my mother was removed from people’s gaze and the usual judgement of her often-strange behaviour in everyday life (Meyerstein 2004).

Perverse though it may seem, the heightened experience of spirituality and thus healing through music for my mother was precisely because of her deeply private and personal engagement with God, which was mediated through the divine sounds of the synagogue. During various periods of talking and music therapy that I have had as an
adult, I have reflected on how and why the music I heard and then listened to later was of a particular kind, and I have realised gradually how such music has shaped the way that I listen to and use music in my life.

6.1. Theme 1: The Privacy of Altering Experience

Music is a spiritual expression of significant universality, and as such, it is intrinsically linked with spirituality as it communicates emotions and thoughts and weaves together belief, religion, and culture. Within this first theme, the nature of music within the participants’ experiences is such that it provided a vehicle through which to reconnect with each individual’s essential identity, but each participant needed the space and time both to allow this to happen and to realise that the process was one that could only happen in solitude. All the participants’ interactions with music arose out of an intensely intimate and private set of spiritual or belief-related experiences or events that set in motion their active intersection with music.

In the case of Dinesh, the initiating experience was because of deep vein thrombosis. As a spiritual person practicing Vedic traditions and immersed in Vedic texts, his response to his medical condition was to isolate himself in the presence of the forest, whereby he experienced the natural rhythms of his body as he struggled with illness and recovery. He noted the following:

"I need to be alone and to allow the sounds and rhythms of the trees and plants to affect me and to become one with their patterns rather than to try and force them to become one with me. I needed to heal, but I needed to do it in their pace and using their means, where before I felt that I was trying to order the universe to suit my needs."

Laura, in contrast, had been diagnosed when very young with a rare condition that ultimately led to her being registered blind at the age of ten. For Laura, the practicality of growing up without sight-imposed solitude from the outside, with other individuals continually and routinely attributing desires, beliefs, and abilities that conflicted with Laura’s inner world and internal struggle to express her identity. Engaging with singing enabled Laura to reinvent herself as someone who was not the sum of predetermined capabilities but as someone who had an inner world that hitherto not been heard. As Laura stated,

"Singing had a profound impact upon me emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. It created a space that I had never managed to find in any other area of my life, a space where my internal world was made external and the gap between how I perceived myself and how I was being perceived by others was lessened."

For Matt, who had early diagnosis of physical disability, music provided a profound means of expressing emotion, but critically, due its physical affordances, percussion satisfied two other critical needs for him: first, the physicality of percussion enabled him to experience movement free from externally imposed restrictions at the hands of other people; second, these instruments physically expanded his hitherto proscribed experiential existence, and they achieved this in a contradictory way. Their ubiquity, even being outside, provided limitless scope for percussive experiences, whilst the ‘work’ of the altering experience could be undertaken mentally and privately:

"Growing up, I often felt loneliness and experienced social exclusion in school, which stemmed from the views of primary school teachers who believed that because I was disabled, I would not amount to anything. The only time I ever felt free from the constraints of my condition was when I was listening to or making music."

In Peter’s case, and in contrast with three of the other participants (but like another participant, Caroline), the narrative has a contrasting arc: his experience with music was pre-existing but became significantly different when it was consciously shaped by his experience of illness in later life. Peter’s intersectional experience of music and belief arises
out of the social impact of music, or as he puts it, the euphoric experience of being at a musical event that made it almost religious in nature. However, this experience was a powerful communal one for Peter, and yet it transformed into a personal and deeply intimate experience when he experienced severe trauma and disability after a spinal cord injury in later life. At that point, the social bonding of music was no longer possible in the same bodily manner as it was previously, and the solace that Peter found necessarily transformed into something that forced it paradoxically to be both social and solitary:

Continuing to attend live concert performances after my accident has given me a purpose, alongside my family and continuing to write and work. I somehow feel “whole again” when I witness a live performance. Without live music, my life would not have the same meaning; I am returning to my own “church” on a journey to find my soul and as a “conduit to [my] religious experiences”.

In common with Peter’s experiences, the narrative arc of Caroline, the last of the participants, bridges the stories of the previous participants: first, Caroline had a deeply cultural and religious home life in which music played an intense if erratic role due to the severe mental health conditions of both her parents. That music could be viewed as a precursor to the restorative physical and mental health of individuals was complicated in the case of Caroline’s experience: within this setting, music was used both as a signifier of distress, of illness and of complex personal, religious, and cultural identity, but also as a very personal means of escape from the profound and continual sadness playing out at home. It was only at the place of worship (despite its imposed structures of physical separation) that Caroline could escape into the privacy of engaging with her own identity and difficulties whilst also appreciating the spirituality of liturgical music, a source of solace, aside from the possibilities of solitude. As she states,

Perverse though it may seem, the heightened experience of spirituality and thus healing through music for my mother was precisely because of her deeply private and personal engagement with God, which was mediated through the divine sounds of the synagogue.

6.2. Theme 2: Self-Therapeutic Realisation

Music can be used therapeutically because it has the power to heal various problems like dementia, anxiety, trauma, and depression. Various countries like China, Greece, Rome, and Ancient India have used music through history to improve human health. Plato, Seneca, and Cicero wanted to ban certain harmful music which affected society’s behaviour inadvertently. It is this concept, balancing the inadvertent with the explicit impact of music, that is the second theme in this narrative structural analysis. To carry out this self-therapeutic sifting and planning for using music purposefully within the setting of our changing and mutable spirituality requires a high level of both self-knowledge and self-obligation. As the participants revealed, although all experienced complex and profound circumstances that led to a much greater explicit interaction with music, the weaving of this within the framework of religious belief was not automatic: in most of the cases, except perhaps Dinesh’s and Caroline’s, religious belief had to be purposefully deployed to give meaning to music so that it could then proceed to act more profoundly across a broader range of feelings, identities, and experiences. This is not to say that other forms of belief system, not just religious, were less profound for the participants. However, it was the formal and structural marshalling of spiritual belief that enabled music to have a universality in the participants’ experiences and not simply a contingent feeling of well-being when used for the purposes of transient difficulty, however acute.

For Matt, the realisation was through a succession of altering experiences and reflections in action that enabled him to, through narrative reflection, articulate distinct elements of self-therapy:
I felt like lightning struck me. His [Elvis’] performance perfectly captured raw, unfiltered emotion, which resonated deeply. Through Elvis’ music, I found a gateway into something entirely mine.

. . . the complications of my disability were so severe that I had no use of my left hand; it hung there, almost lifeless. A chance encounter with a drummer in the local church began a physical healing process […] he asked if I could hold a drumstick in my left hand and attempt to hit the snare drum. I could!

For Peter, like Matt, his therapeutic realisations began as reflections in action that acquired increasing salience as he constructed a framework of therapy and spirituality weaved together:

My disabilities are no longer an issue; I am swept away by the live performance and how I connect with the artist on the stage.

In the case of Laura, her realisations are more structured and have arguably more conscious and identity-related salience. In large part, this is due to the competing identities and belief systems that Laura has meshed to form a coherent identity that was always present for her mentally and individually but that has become more externally expressed reflective of Laura’s authentic inner identity:

Although my disability has very much shaped my identity and life immeasurably, my own notion and construction of selfhood and what it means to be me is very much distinct from and separate to my status as a person who is blind.

. . . singing offered a way for me to freely express my internal world. Indeed, singing, as a form of self-expression, enabled me to challenge stereotypes and redefine my identity. It allowed me to break free from predetermined societal roles and assert my unique identity, and it quite literally enabled me to feel like my voice was being heard.

For both Dinesh and Caroline alike, the pre-existence of religious belief and spirituality played a complex and paradoxical role in the awareness of self-therapeutic realisation. For Dinesh, a familiarity with Indian music and Vedic texts shaped how he listened differently and more consciously to what he terms the universe’s rhythmic dance after his illness. He notes, for example, the realisation that Indian classical music has ragas for specific times of the day, following the natural ebbs and flows of nature’s sounds and nature’s silences. For Caroline, her observations of sacred music and divine liturgy, particularly in prayer, in both chapel and synagogue, echo her experience of deep distress whilst elevating emotion with their soaring lamentations; in this seamless and interwoven experience of music and religion, a sacred environment is formed and continually reformed, where spirituality may be reinforced.

6.3. Theme 3: Conscious Continuity

Music can teach us about beliefs that are not routinely associated with the explicit and overt elements of music as a therapeutic vehicle for recovery. Culture has used music in healing for centuries. It is almost impossible to overstate the tightly woven relationship between music and culture. Culture in music cognition reflects the impact that a person’s culture has on emotion, recognition, and musical memory. What these narratives illustrate is that although all the participants were knowledgeable about what music meant to them and were conscious of the need to create the emotions that impacted upon their identities and well-being, none were explicitly versed in how to do this systematically; therefore, arguably, many missed opportunities for music to be even more efficacious in relation to spirituality and spiritual awareness. If all of them were deeply committed to experiencing music, none of them, except for Laura, knew how to consciously integrate it into their ongoing experiences, and in one case (that of Caroline), they were not willing to do so due to the deep trauma associated with religion and music. What the narratives show is that the spirituality of music and its connections with religion are often subconscious and inadvertent, but to transform music so that it becomes an architect of something more

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spiritual that can provide scaffolding for spiritual lives in the longer term requires conscious continuity. This can be achieved through actively taking part in musical activities that are explicitly spiritual, as Matt illustrates:

I continue to play an active role in the life of a local church as a drummer on the worship team. When I experienced loneliness and isolation, I found solace in my faith, and the church was a haven for me. It helped me develop socially and emotionally by integrating me into its community. It also furthered my musical abilities by allowing me to engage in music making with other church members.

Alternatively, music may entwine with spirituality through the systematic exposure of oneself to readings and films that use music with the express purpose of evoking specific emotional states, as Dinesh articulates:

The Sama Veda of Melodies and Chants in the Sanatan Dharma teaches us that the Divine Absolute, known as Brahman (Space), through the concepts of Sabda-Brahman (Sacred Sound as God) and especially Nāda-Brahman, comprises Nāda-Shakti (sound energy) and Brahman (Beck 2019). Those who create music are believed to have a God’s gift, and their music is a gift to those who listen to their music. I believe most people get lost in the forest, but I found my true potential in it, which provides a unique peace that is only to be experienced, and no one describes it.

Alternatively, as in the case of Caroline, seeking musical therapy later in life to address hitherto unspoken and traumatic experiences may act to purposefully construct the use of music as an agent of continuity in one’s spiritual life:

During various periods of talking and music therapy that I have had as an adult, I have reflected on how and why the music I heard and then listened to later was of a particular kind, and I have realised gradually how such music has shaped the way that I listen to and use music in my life. Although I have had, at various times, both a complex and comforting relationship with music, it is, simply put, an act of deeply spiritual healing in my life that I use actively, consciously, individually, and communally.

Additionally, such experiences form nothing less than an ongoing and spiritual renewal for Laura, a continual dialogue in relation to the voices and the othering imposed on her from the outside, together with the in-progress construction work that Laura commits to in relation to reinforcing who she is and what she is from the inside outwards:

The combination of my voice and the melody I was producing felt like a way of communicating the essence of who I am, revealed my potential, and enabled others to see it too.

7. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

Music is a vehicle for the spiritual expression of people’s emotions set within their life experiences. As such, it plays an integral role in spirituality and belief since it articulates thoughts, wants, and desires mediated through culture. Further, any musical experience that enables a connection with a person’s authentic self is spiritual. What the narratives in this paper illustrate profoundly is that music plays an integral part in these people’s lives and in their daily routine, through design, through accident, but critically through a process of conscious and constant renewal. Difficult experiences that create suffering may provide opportunities for spiritual growth through adoption of musical frameworks to explore and understand one’s own experiences of pain and trauma (Abbot et al. 2001), and this is evident in this study.

Set within this, our childhood experience of music transmits different and contrasting sets of traditions (Cohen 2009). Spirituality within studies of music is a cultural act at every level, our first experience of it shaped by the cultures and faiths of our families (Soley and Spelke 2016) or of the places of worship in which we may have heard familiar music, such as songs recited at home from our earliest years (Young 2008). However, we may also hear
sounds that we have never heard before and experience bodily interaction with rhythm and sound that we have never felt before, incorporating these creatively into our personal identities alongside contemporary youth music culture (Young and Gillen 2007). Young (2008) suggests that children are exposed to music at an early age through the canon of classical songs that frequently accompany TV programmes or toy digital music fragments; they may also experience it through worship that reinforces unique associations with music that are persistent in adulthood. For example, several Upanishads and Vedic texts highlight the close bonds between music and religious experiences, leading to an acceptance of the spiritual in children who accompany their parents in reading or worship.

Such an awareness creates the conditions for specific cultural interpretations of music that manifest as comfort and solace within traumatic experiences or life events (Beck 2019). As Muehsam and Ventura (2014) point out, nature, especially the forest and its rhythm, may change the nature of human experience if time is spent in its presence. When interwoven with culture in this way, music can often seem as if it is competing with culture to find the centre of someone’s essence, but this is to misunderstand music’s relationship with culture not as an activity that undermines the unique cultural context that someone grows up with but, as Sztokman (2011) suggests, to critically understand music’s spiritual power so that the intersection of music and religion creates a sacred environment where individual spirituality may be heightened and deepened (or subdued and hollowed). Music is a vehicle that helps individuals in distress to find a space in the world. It is almost unique in that it enables this through a variety of affordances: through practically enabling participation; through vocally enabling a voice; and through spiritually making and validating space for individuals in all their diversity and uniqueness. Peter’s experience articulates this most cogently when he says that

I believe that music and spirituality helped me recover and rediscover meaning in my life and at the same time redefine my personal identity.

Jones et al. (2019, p. 9) discuss how ‘Increased spirituality and resilience make a significant contribution … to positive psychological outcomes’ for individuals with complex and extensive injuries. Likewise, Vanier and Cox (2016) emphasize the importance of finding a spiritual pathway for people who are blind; such a pathway may be a space where they can connect with something which transcends the everyday constructed notion of disability. For Laura, this was profoundly the case, and as she states, singing provided such a space, physically and metaphorically. Conversely, it was a physical space that was created for Matt. According to Fedrizzi et al. (2003), hemiplegic individuals prefer their unaffected hand early on and display little or no use of their affected hand, which is clearly deeply problematic for individuals aspiring to be musicians. However, for such individuals, including Matt, music provides the means of healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually by explicitly challenging physical limitations and, indeed, making a virtue out of them through other means (in Matt’s case, through drumsticks and other percussive items) (Frith 1996).

Finally, music exposes and facilitates different authenticities through its capacity to hold values and principles in such a way that differs from most other experiences. For example, it may lead to a sense of loyalty and steadfastness, since we may return to it repeatedly and ask it to evoke emotional states that support us without judgement and indulge us without demanding anything in return. Conversely, it may facilitate a state of heightened questioning and reflection, when we discover song lyrics that we had never listened to previously; yet, in doing so, it only asks that we reconsider and listen more carefully, rather than demanding that we discard all we knew of ourselves up to that point. Such experiences are truly ‘transcendent’—they open our inner worlds to the possibility of a different ‘us’ emerging, and without them, arguably, life would not have the same meaning. As Peter suggests, “I am returning to my own “church” on a journey to find my soul and as a “conduit to [my] religious experiences” (Nantais 2011).

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