Introduction

The educational context for the reflections that follow is my teaching of group-based acoustic free improvisation in UK HE institutions and, more recently, a digital equivalent. Furthermore, they are informed by my experiences as an improviser, both digitally and acoustically, in class and professionally. It also develops work I have published exploring the psychological characteristics of improvisation and their significance. (Sansom 2007). Applying post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, it considered aspects of musical meaning that serve in the construction and representation of identity. From a series of studies using qualitative research methods, a particular kind of experience came to the fore in the most heightened and meaningful episodes, and provided empirical evidence for what is often associated with experiences of music’s ‘spiritual’ dimension: where more objectively perceived states of consciousness fluctuate and give way to a loss of self. (Sansom 2007: 10).

Descriptions of similar experiences across a range musical activity are relatively well documented. Staying with improvised music, David Borgo, for example, recounts musicians’ descriptions of ecstatic and trancelike performance states, the...
annihilation of critical and rational faculties, and quotes the bassist William Parker’s explanation of free music as an “emptying [of] oneself and being.” (Borgo 2007: 25). Stephen Nachmanovitch, significantly describing it as ‘common experience’, writes:

The intensity of your focused concentration and involvement maintains and augments itself, your physical needs decrease, your gaze narrows, your sense of time stops. You feel alert and alive; effort becomes effortless. […] you forget time and place and who you are. The noun of self becomes a verb. (1990: 51-52)

June Boyce-Tillman in her phenomenography of spirituality in experience defines such encounters as “the[ir] ability to transport the experiencer to a different time/space dimension – to move them from everyday reality to a world other than the commonplace.” (Boyce-Tillman 2007: 1410-1411). This, and her related work on the liminal space in musicking (Boyce-Tillman 2009), broadens and contextualises the understanding of these shifts in consciousness via a range of sources taking in psychology, anthropology, mysticism, consciousness studies, and the likes of Buber, Maslow, Dewey, and Derrida along the way. And there are many other disciplines and approaches that have a contribution to make. Two notable examples are Richard Ellyn Jones’ *Music and the Numinous* (2007), which draws on Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, and Judith Becker’s *Deep Listeners* (2004) with its deft synthesis of science, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. This paper brings to the discussion a Traditionalist or Perennial Philosophical approach. Although paradigmatically at odds with the secular humanism of academia, in relation to this topic it offers a highly relevant and specialist body of knowledge, which – if one has to argue its validity – has a historical and cultural legacy far beyond material rationalism.²

² In relation to evidence for an original common source of the religious and spiritual traditions Guénon writes, “Where one finds such similarities everywhere, is this not simply a straightforward indication of the existence of a primordial tradition? And how can one explain that as often as not the very people who feel compelled to admit in principle the existence of such a tradition give it no further thought and carry on arguing as if it had never existed, or at least as if nothing of it had been preserved over the centuries? … All one has to do is seek a little, with the proviso that the search is approached in an unbiased way, and
It’s important, at this point, to note two things: first, that such experiences are common and widespread, and can be broadly defined and understood (for examples from other activities and settings see Marshall & Zohar 2000: 96-101); and second, is their significance to musical experience. Boyce-Tillman comments that the “perceived effectiveness of a musical experience […] is often situated in this area.” (2007: 1411). For freely improvised music we can extend this to say that its aesthetic is fundamentally determined by it. The pursuit of such encounters becomes both its determining motivator and addictive mark of success. Its presence elsewhere in the realms of music education is arguably just as critical but in less directly definitive ways. My suggestion is that a key aspect of the inherent value that the experiences music education provides resides in such encounters. The rest of this paper is concerned to interpret the nature of these experiences based on insights offered by Perennialism as a means of bringing further definition to how spirituality in music might be approached and usefully understood.

**Spirituality and Traditionalism**

So far, following Boyce-Tillman (2007: 1405), a relationality between spirituality and musical experience is implied by virtue of potential for transportive and unitive states of consciousness, and equates the aesthetic encounter with phenomena associated with spirituality.3 In order to explore this idea from a Perennialist perspective both spirituality and Traditionalism require further definition. Spirituality is understood here to emphasize the experiential and personal side of how we relate to notions of the transcendent. (Nelson 2009: 8). Opening this definition out we can say that spirituality encompasses: (1) a source of values and ultimate meaning or purpose beyond the self, including a sense of mystery and self-transcendence; (2) a way of understanding; (3) inner awareness; one will discover on all sides indications of an essentially unified teaching which humanity has sometimes lost sight of, but which has never entirely disappeared.” (Quoted in Rooth 2008: 3).

3 Boyce-Tillman goes so far as to state “the aesthetic is a secular term for the Spiritual domain.” (2007: 1418).
and (4) personal integration. (Wade Clark Roof 1991: 35, cited in Nelson 2009: 8). Complementing this, we can incorporate a Perennialist nuance, which, although recognising spirituality's connection with religious faith and practice, acknowledges its relative independence by virtue of similarities in spiritual experience that cross and depart from such traditions.

_Philosophia perennis_ first entered the European lexicon in 1540 following philosopher and priest Marsilio Ficino’s view that all religions share a common origin in a single perennial or primordial religion that subsequently takes on other forms, including for example Zoroastrian, Platonic, Christian, and so on. (Sedgewick 2004: 23-24). It was widely accepted until the early 17th century, referred to by Leibniz in the 18th, and then revived and modified in the 19th following the newly discovered Vedas (translated into French and published in 1828). (23-4). In the 20th century Aldous Huxley popularized the term with his 1946 book *The Perennial Philosophy* in which he provides the following succinct definition of it as: “the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; a psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.” (Huxley 1974: 1). Special mention should be made also of René Guénon (1885-1951), who, together with Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), is considered to be one of the founders of 'traditionalist' or 'perennialist' thought in the present era. (Herlihy 2009: x-xi). As might be expected Perennialism interconnects with the preceding definition of spirituality and also brings its own refinements and kinds of emphasis:

1. The Perennialist view embodies a specific ‘way of understanding’, a paradigm with its own epistemological implications and means of comprehension. It is metaphysical, in the traditional sense of a category of knowledge beyond the scope of the natural sciences (Rooth 2008: 238); knowledge that recognizes a transcendent Real, or Supreme Principle, which is perceived through direct suprarational intuition rather than the discursive indirect knowledge of the rational
mind. (246). This Absolute is beyond time and determines the cosmological context for the world of everyday experience, which is real only relative to transcendent Reality. It is only through and because of the Absolute that our local level of reality exists at all.\(^4\)

2. From this specifically contingent relational context, arises the soul with its divine spark, and a sense of purpose and values that extend beyond the self.

3. This \textit{telos} arises from an ‘inner awareness’ gained through unmediated knowledge of the ineffable and ‘incommensurate otherness’ (Huxley 1974: 42) of the Divine, and represents in itself a form of spiritual ‘realization’.\(^5\)

4. This leads to the final consideration, that the goal and ethic of a life well lived is to achieve ‘personal integration’, liberation and enlightenment based on “a unitive personal knowledge and harmonious relation with the ‘spiritual Ground of all things’.” (Huxley cited in Nelson 2009: 122). Guénon comments that, “anyone who wants to find out about it [i.e. realization] has to undertake profound inner work beyond thought […].” (Rooth 2008: 247). This ‘inner work’ (notably under guidance from an authentic initiatory religious tradition) involves disciplines and practices that aim at dethroning the self-regarding ego eventually to the point at which the individual self is replaced by a permanent and unshakeable realization of the Supreme Identity. (Rooth 2008: 140).\(^6\)

---

\(^4\) “In other words, there is a hierarchy of the real. The manifold world of our everyday experience is real with a relative reality that is, on its own level, unquestionable; but this relative reality has its being within and because of the absolute Reality, which, on account of the incommensurable otherness of its eternal nature, we can never hope to describe, even though it is possible for us to directly apprehend it.” (Huxley 1974: 42).

\(^5\) As Guénon writes, “the distinctive characteristic of metaphysical knowledge is that it cannot be communicated verbally because it falls within the province of a specific order of realization.” (Rooth 2008: 247).

\(^6\) It is significant that during this process there are temporary ‘states’ of realization as well as more truly transformative and permanent ‘stations’. (140).
Mirror of the Real: the greater and the lesser

The interpretation that follows, applies this ontological framework as a means of enriching the relational paring of musical experience and spirituality previously referred to and seen in the likes of Nachmanovitch’s conflation-comparisons with Buddhist *samadhi*, and the Sufi term *fanā*, used to describe the annihilation of the self in God. (1990: 52-53). Such parallels help articulate musical experience in useful ways, but it is clear, even from a cursory understanding of the broader metaphysical context from which such terms emanate, that direct comparisons are a necessary simplification. An esoteric Perennialist interpretation can, alternately, include the spiritual worldview itself in its understanding of the status and meaning of aesthetic experience and of any parallels that might exist. As Guénon writes, “natural phenomena and historical events all have a symbolic value in that they express something of the principles on which they are dependent.” (Rooth 2008: 221).

The kind of musical creativity in question here, and from my teaching, has a Deleuzian and psychoanalytic orientation, which, to use Pamela Burnard’s terms, deliberately questions notions of ‘domain’ (sets of rules and practices), emphasises ‘individual’ agency (the psychological perspective), and is located in the ‘field’ of non-idiomatic group- and process-based improvised music. (Burnard 2012: 8). It is Deleuzian in its emphasis on achieving capacity for new perceptions, affects, and thoughts through the subtle taking apart of the “tenacious conventions and clichés that permit us to communicate and judge, but prevent us from saying or making anything new.” (Marks 2010: 17). Pedagogically this emerges through the following emphasis:

1) Process- and experience-based learning: ‘practice-based thinking’ as opposed to ‘technique-led practice’
2) ‘Free’ music as a discipline with parameters, skills and sensibilities that can be practiced and learnt (albeit emergent and sometimes individually determined)
3) An open-ended and expansive approach to the musical medium and its language (incorporating a non-idiomatic prerogative)
4) Alternate ways of understanding and perceiving, using experience and intuition

5) Alternate ways of listening and responding, exploiting varying degrees of conscious control: intuitive, bodily, instinctual, accidental, etc.

6) A social and relational ethic as its aesthetic base

The central agenda is one of evolving a shared musical language and which typically involves some reconfiguration of most students’ prior understanding about what music and music making is. Admittedly, perhaps at the extreme end of configurations of musical creativity, but which contains universals that connect and cross with other configurations.

Motivation

The interpretative analysis that follows is organised around three themes: motivation, methodologies, and principles. From a Perennialist perspective, but not limited to, an inner impulse and implicit need for knowledge about the metaphysical exists, and certainty that there are ways of discovering and of understanding this ‘beyond’ is the essence around which the world’s various religious and esoteric traditions are formed. We can observe a similar impulse reflected in the necessarily experimental nature of musical creativity; the often intuited sense that there are alternative ways of doing and understanding things, going beyond received knowledge, accepted norms, etc., and the drive and liberty to pursue such promptings through action. In my teaching practice, with the right negotiations over technical issues, and managing expectations by granting permission and establishing trust, students consistently exhibit a wellspring of energy and desire for experimentation. The suggestion is of a mirroring of spirituality as the ‘experiential and personal side of how we relate to notions of the transcendent’ in contrast with more religiously mediated and received modes, and of the creative necessity in the individual to determine and discover the parameters of the relationship. Educationally this is established by non-reliance upon idiomatic devices as a means of establishing ways of communicating
musically, encouraging students to question the basis for musical communication and to determine their own means of achieving it.

Methodologies
The area of methodologies relates primarily with the techniques employed in the pursuit of realization, and the characteristic dynamics or nature of the journey itself. To recap: in order to attain union with the ineffable divine, the spiritual traveller is guided, under the direction of a teacher, through traditionally defined spiritual practices (e.g. meditation, recitation, fasting, and so on) in order to sufficiently activate the intuitive or supra-rational receptivity required for metaphysical truths.

The first analogy to note is of someone already ‘travelled’, guiding the student. In both settings the final outcomes are essentially unknowable to the initiate and it is prior knowledge of the benefits of the process of getting there, and its nature, that the teacher brings to the equation and so can facilitate not only the mechanisms required but also trust in the student. In a slightly different musical field, initiatory dynamics are also apparent in the way composers and performers list their tutor lineages. As a way of validating the authenticity of one’s practice, it also implies the transmission, certainly of knowledge, but also plausibly of a particular ‘mode of being’ that passes from master to student. Other significant analogies to make here are: the necessity of process- and experience-based learning in order to achieve experiential knowledge; the idea that musical ‘freedom’ or the liberties of spiritual enlightenment are attainable, perhaps paradoxically at first sight, through systematic means; and efforts to extend the range of thinking, listening and responding, with a particular stress on the role and value of intuition and other strategies aimed at loosening the influence of the conscious and rational mind. In the musical setting, workshop sessions, discussions, and exposure the new repertoire, aid the process towards new ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving and ultimately music making, just as in the spiritual setting the process moves the individual towards new ways of perceiving reality and the self.
**Principles**

Finally, the principles of perennialist thought of most relevance here relate to the nature of reality and the call to personal integration. The cosmological relationality of existence, that everyday experience is real only relative to the Transcendent, imbues all things with sanctity and relational import; and it is in the harmonizing of this ultimate relationality that fulfillment resides. The specific aesthetic foregrounding of a social ethic in improvised music (and of course most music making) is a strong analogue to this imperative, and the practical playing out of its dynamic, as the music’s *raison d’être*, further underscores the parallel.

As we have seen, the work, or rather ‘Great Work’, the individual is called to achieve, results in an evolution of consciousness understood as the achievement of its union with God where the aspirant ‘dies to self’ in some measure, in order to ‘make room’ for God. At this point we return to the transportive, time and space consciousness shifting musical experiences the paper began with, but now hopefully with a framework for understanding how these experiences can be understood not necessarily as spiritual in and of themselves, but rather as metaphors and signs for spiritual realities and the inherent spiritual possibilities we might possess. In the Perennialist hierarchy of reality, such musical experiences connect or resonate with, but lack equivalence to, related and similar experiences encountered within traditionally defined and understood authentic spiritual practices.

**Conclusion**

The framework and interpretative model described here, offers a way for those of us interested in the experiential connections between music and spirituality to understand the deeper significance of working in and through the medium of music: ultimately, as a metaphor that reflects and directs to the Real.

Thank you

---

7 Holman 2008: 8
References


Borgo, David, 2007: *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum)


Marshall, Ian & Zohar, Danah, 2000: *SQ: Spiritual Intelligence, the Ultimate Intelligence* (London: Bloomsbury)


