

# MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL  
METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

EDITED BY  
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# Afterword: A Psychologist's Perspective

*John Sloboda*

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I am grateful to the editors to have been placed in the position of 'participant-observer' to the workshop which allowed authors to try out first drafts of chapters destined for this book. I was a participant by virtue of reading a short paper and engaging in the cut and thrust of dialogue; but I was an observer in two senses. First, I am not currently professionally engaged in work on music and spirituality, and never really have been. I did write one chapter-length think piece a quarter a century ago,<sup>1</sup> which the editors were kind enough to consider raised some relevant questions and attempted sketches of answers. But this is a slender thread to link me to a group of experts who make this topic their professional daily bread and butter. Second, I was assigned the daunting task of constructing a brief response to the contributions as a whole in the conference's final session. Such a role inevitably forces one somewhat to the margins, standing outside and viewing the proceeding from a particular, and inevitably personal, vantage point. As is completely right and proper, and to be expected, the period between the workshop and the submission of final texts was a period of further reflection and maturation of ideas, both for the chapter authors and myself. Now, seeing the volume as a whole, and with some further distance from the event itself, I have refreshed and reframed my own observations shared with participants at the time. And so what is written here has some

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1 John A. Sloboda, 'Music and Worship: A Psychologist's Perspective', in *Creative Chords: Studies in Music, Theology and Christian Formation*, ed. by Jeff Astley, Timothy Hone, and Micahel Savage (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), pp. 110–25.

substantial overlaps with, but also some significant differences from, what I shared at the workshop.

The cumulative effect of these diverse and passionately engaged contributions has been to impress upon me ever more strongly that positionality is at the heart of the appreciation of the relationship of music to the spiritual. By positionality I simply mean what each individual brings to the table, and the lens through which that allows them to experience and understand the phenomenon in question, a phenomenon that was explicitly addressed by Maeve Louise Heaney (Chapter 11). Positionality has at least three distinct elements in this collection. We all bring different faith and worship orientations and histories which influence how we approach the spiritual. In my case, the history is of a post-Second Vatican Council English Roman Catholic. We all have a musical history which influences what forms of music we inhabit and engage with, and at what level. My musical history is primarily as someone trained in the European classical tradition and with a particular love for sacred choral music of the Anglican tradition. And finally we all have a professional practice, which involves a set of theoretical and methodological predispositions and resources, and which informs how we go about our investigations and our writing. My professional practice is neither musical nor faith based, but reflects the discipline of academic empirical psychology, conceived of as a science, and robustly materialist in its assumptions.

The brand of academic psychology which informed my stand-alone turn-of-the-century think piece was the dominant approach of the 1960s–90s, and might be described as cognitive universalism. It self-confidently assumed that, because the basic neural substrate of all humans is similar, universally valid conclusions about psychological mechanisms and outcomes could be arrived at by extrapolating or generalising from the experiences and actions of individuals occupying a specific time, place, and context. Indeed, the introspectionist tradition at the foundation of modern psychology was based on the belief that, with sufficient training and discernment, a sample of one—oneself—could be sufficient to draw universally relevant conclusions. As the twentieth century progressed, behaviourist approaches gained ascendancy, emphasising more the utility of collecting data from a range of individuals through various forms of measurement and quantitative analytic tools, often trading

depth of meaning for formal rigour and statistical significance. In more recent decades, qualitative approaches have re-emerged to enrich the range of sources used to understand human response—recognising that people talking about themselves can offer as important insights as observing some quantitatively measurable aspect of their behaviour. That shift represented a renewed acknowledgement that interiority cannot be completely observed or understood from the outside, it has to be expressed and articulated by the person whose interiority it is. And, whatever commonalities might be discovered at more surface levels, interiority in its depth may be unique and unrepeatable, not only as between individuals, but even within the same individual at different times.

That observation brings us to the nub of one of the key issues with which the various authors of this volume grapple in different ways. Spirituality—however defined and articulated—is an interior and essentially private phenomenon, experienced by individuals, and not apprehensible from the outside by some reliable marker, whether an environment, a ritual, or a physiological event. From a theological standpoint, a spiritual experience might be taken to be an experience of encounter with the divine. A faith-based approach can situate the divine in specific human situations. So, for instance, the eucharistic theology of Catholicism asserts that God is present in a uniquely powerful and effective way when believers break bread together in memory of Christ's actions at the Last Supper. But even such a restricted lens doesn't lead to a reliable hermeneutic (or even correlatory) link between the external and the internal. It would be a mistake to identify the words or actions of the consecration themselves as the guarantor or sure predictor of the presence of a spiritual experience in a worshipper. The presence of God in the Eucharist might be a theological reality, given by faith, but that does not determine whether or how such reality presents itself in the spiritual experience of a worshipper. The individual concerned has to bear witness to this before we would know. And even such witness is problematic, because of the slipperiness of the term 'spiritual' as a marker for what we might be asking a person to report on.

C.M. Howell (Chapter 6) writes 'It is often noted that "spirituality" is inherently vague'. He goes on to outline half a dozen different ways in which it has been interpreted in the literature. Scanning through the rest of the chapters easily yields half a dozen more. Howells goes on to assert

that 'despite this ambiguity, there is an ever-increasing use of the term spirituality. Indeed, the term's ambiguity, rather than being perceived as a deficiency, appears to be part of its strength and appeal'. But one could also argue that the ambiguity could also be a weakness when it comes to the task of making intellectual progress in understanding the spiritual, and its relationship to music. There is perhaps a danger that the very ambiguity and slipperiness of the term spiritual allows us to smuggle in unacknowledged premises and unnamed biases; or at least to be somewhat talking past each other as we deploy different understandings. Notwithstanding this, it was a pragmatic and fruitful idea for the editors to invite contributors to review a toolkit of methods to take us further in the exploration of the relationship between the music and the spiritual. And I would contend that one of the most useful elements of that toolkit would be a rigorous means of untangling this great web of ambiguity around the concept of spirituality in itself.

In this volume there are several chapters that highlight what can be learned from empirical social science methods, such as gathering survey, interview, or online responses from diverse groups of individuals. And just as there are a dozen or more different understandings of spirituality among the authorship of this volume, there is sure to be the same variety, and more, in the population at large. So that when we interrogate their experience with the blunt and ambiguous term 'spiritual' we may not really know what they have in mind when they engage in discourse using this term. One of the tools extensively used by psychologists is conceptual mapping.<sup>2</sup> In this process, one accumulates a set of related words and concepts and attempts to lay them out on some underlying dimensions which elucidate their relationship to each other. A scan through the texts of the various chapters easily generates a list of some recurrent descriptors:

Divine

Sacred

Religious

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2 It has been extensively used, for example, to discern underlying conceptual structures among the plethora of words describing emotions (see Rick L. Morgan and David Heise, 'Structure of Emotions', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 51.1 (1988), 19–31).

Worshipful (praise / adoration)

Mystical contemplation

Immaterial

[Spiritual]

Transcendent

Ecstatic

Peak experience

Uplifting

Absorption

Transformative

Contemplative

Flow

Comforting

How can we make sense, constructively, and empirically, of such a ragbag? Psychology has provided a range of techniques through which we can ask people to compare these concepts, to rate each in some way (for example, their degree of similarity to the others), and then through statistical technique such as factor analysis or multidimensional scaling create a dimensionally organised visualisation of their closeness or distance in conceptual space.

The figure below is one personal and intuitive attempt at a conceptual map, constructed not as any kind of claim to truth, but as an example of how the ragbag might all be contained within a more comprehensible and coherent space that allows concepts to be seen as nearer or further to each other along bipolar dimensions. This space is two-dimensional (just for ease of display—three or more dimensions sometimes better represent the relationships present). From left to right we move from the incorporeal to the corporeal. From top to bottom we move from the active (or disruptive) to the passive (or accepting). Each concept can be placed on these two dimensions.

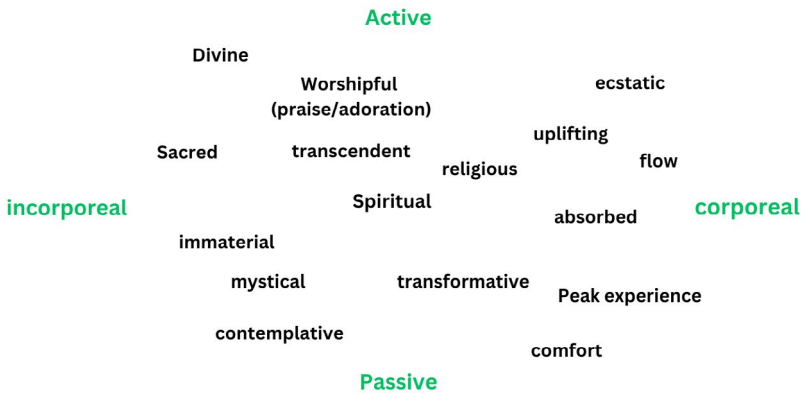


Fig. A.1 A conceptual map for descriptors pertaining to spirituality in this volume.  
Created by author (2024), CC BY-NC 4.0

The point here is not whether each is in the ‘right’ place, or even whether these are the most appropriate dimensions on which to compare the individual concepts collected here. The illustration is rather to demonstrate a possible empirical technique for distinguishing how different types of musical experience might map onto such a space. A person whose interpretation of ‘spiritual’ tends towards the ‘passive’ and the ‘corporeal’ may—for instance—react to different musics and in different ways, to a person whose interpretation of spiritual tends towards the ‘active’ and ‘immaterial’.

This classificatory or dimensional approach offers a useful bridge between two equally unhelpful extremes. The one extreme is the view that everyone is essentially the same in their reactions to and predispositions towards a range of phenomena. The other extreme is that each individual is totally different from every other individual, and must be treated as a unique incomparable case. A dimensional approach allows the characterisation of types, the delineation of groups who have similar tendencies which can help predict and understand how they behave and respond in comparison to other groups. Personality psychology has flourished under the application of such approaches, and the use of such models as the Myers–Briggs Type Index has found



its way into some approaches to spirituality and spiritual guidance.<sup>3</sup> Just as we should take care to understand what lies beneath a person's designation of an experience as spiritual, and thereby allow for and take account of distinct types of spiritual experience or engagement, so we should also take care to acknowledge that music is not one thing, but encompasses many styles, practices, contexts. We should be cautious of asserting 'Music is...', and rather opt for 'some types of music, when offered in certain contexts, may be...'

In 'Music and Worship' (2000), I opined that music has characteristics conducive to a state of worship, and identified those affordances with ineffability, associative power, the power to unite or co-ordinate response.<sup>4</sup> To touch briefly on each of these three characteristics in turn, *ineffability* refers to the observation that no matter how much you can know about a piece of music, there is always an unknowable residue. The unknowability is both at a macro-level and a micro-level. These characteristics mean that engaging with music deeply is an act of constant and never-ending discovery—pointing us towards the never-ending ineffability of the divine. *Associative power* refers to music's huge power to evoke memories, sometimes deep memories, and so lift us from the present into recollections of times of great joy or sorrow, times with great personal or communal significance. Finally, music has *unifying characteristics* which allow responses which are shared or communal, and co-ordinated, not simply individualistic. This comes about because there are certain structural or communicative features of music which are perceived in similar ways by most people, regardless of their familiarity with the music or their degree of musical sophistication. In addition, I did argue, as has also been mentioned by authors of this volume, that these features offer affordances (or opportunities) for worshipful or spiritual experience, although they require an active response and do not guarantee such experiences. I would now be even more cautious, a caution which the range of musical and worship contexts covered in the current volume exemplifies and details. As a result of the work presented in this volume, we are now gaining a greater understanding

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3 See, for example, Gill Hall, 'Applying Psychological-Type Theory to Faith: Spirituality, Prayer, Worship and Scripture', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 15.9 (2012), 849–62.

4 Sloboda, 'Music and Worship'.

of how *some* music, presented in *some* contexts *may* offer affordances for deeper worship to *some* people.

This understanding highlights why, in worship, the role of a liturgist or musical director is so important. This person is one who thoughtfully curates the relationship between the worshipping congregation on the one hand, and the compositions they engage with on the other. In some times and places the musical director and the composer have been the self-same person, writing music for a context and a congregation they know intimately and able to accompany through the liturgical year, and over the life cycle. In the current Western, consumer-oriented society this has in some cases been supplanted by opportunities to engage in something more akin to a type of musico-spiritual 'shopping'. Individuals can choose worship contexts where the music that is offered suits what they judge their spiritual requirements to be. In my tradition this can be a question of deciding whether to go to the guitar Mass or the High Sung Mass in a parish that offers both, or stepping down the road to a neighbouring church where the music is more to one's taste. It can also be a question of a discerning director of music adjusting the musical offering to the needs and capacities of the congregation. A hymn that he or she does not personally resonate with may be the exact one to stimulate fervent participation from a particular congregation, whereas his or her favourite (on aesthetic or theological grounds) may fall flat.

It is therefore good to see in the different chapters a fuller treatment of the range of ways in which music and spiritual experience may co-exist. Spiritual uplift is not the unique province of religious worship, and may be found in situations as diverse as American country music (Howell, Chapter 6), or singing on the football terraces of Wales (Clarke, Chapter 18). And even in worship, one's positionality within a worshipping congregation may significantly inflect the value one gains from musical engagement. Dimensions of interest are, for instance, whether one is or is not paid for one's musical engagement, or whether musical experience in worship is a daily (or several-times-per day) one, or an occasional one. This draws me to a framing and concluding point, which I hope will not be taken as pouring too much cold water on our joint enterprise. We probably do not yet have a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the situations in which music has no particularly positive effect on people, and may even have a negative effect. This is highlighted by Dilana Turan

(Chapter 8) when she discusses 'why some ritual settings promote the emergence of ASC [altered state of consciousness] experiences for some people, while the same music and setting might be meaningless, boring, or disturbing for others'. The same music that can afford worship and other profoundly positive effects may—for other people in other contexts and with other personal histories and orientations—become alienating, aversive, and in extreme but clearly documented cases amount to torture.<sup>5</sup> It is certainly the case that many people have definite music preferences, with clear categories of disliked music,<sup>6</sup> categories which are unlikely to offer a path to their spiritual uplift. In other cases it may just be that music is not particularly important to an individual. When people decide to write about music, or agree to be participants in research studies on music, it may be precisely because they fall into the category of people who are strongly drawn to music, and whose lives have been significantly and positively touched by their engagement with music. Of course, such people will rightly wish to assert and articulate its value.

There is one way of taking a body of perspectives on music such as is collected here, which is to see it as a collection of individual testimonies. In each case, the author is telling a story, constructing or curating a narrative which, when well-written, as all of these are, draws us into their worldview and persuades us of it by stimulating resonances, contrasts, and illuminations in the reader's thoughts and imaginations. When such testimonies are bent towards scholarly rather than literary endeavours, they are, of course, designed to shed light on something that has external reality, as opposed to being imaginative or fictional. But nonetheless, a scientific lens should not be held to have privileged access to the reality being explored—it is just one of the specific (and undoubtedly effective) lenses through which some of us can choose to curate our narrative, and sharpen our means of persuasion. Would someone with no affinity for either the spiritual or the musical be persuaded by the collective wisdom laid out so eloquently in this book?

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5 See, for instance, Morag Josephine Grant, 'The Illogical Logic of Music Torture', *Torture* 23.2 (2013), 4–13, where the author explicitly warns against the assumption that such uses are some kind of extreme aberration from a universal positive norm.

6 Taren-Ida Ackermann and Julia Merrill, 'Rationales and Functions of Disliked Music: An In-Depth Interview Study', *PLoS One* 17.2 (2022), e0263384.

Perhaps not! But for those who already resonate within their own hearts to the notion that music has a special role in shaping and bringing forth their deepest and most profound apprehensions, then this volume will undoubtedly bring into being new understandings and new sources of inspiration. For that we should be very thankful.