

## EDITORIAL

Special Issue | Exploring the spiritual in music: Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, wellbeing and education

# Exploring the spiritual in music

## Giorgos Tsiris

Queen Margaret University; St Columba's Hospice, UK

## Gary Ansdell

University of Bergen, Norway; University of Exeter, UK

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Giorgos Tsiris**, PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Music Therapy at Queen Margaret University and Arts Lead at St Columba's Hospice in Edinburgh, UK. Exploring the performance of spirituality in everyday music therapy contexts, his doctorate research has introduced new conceptual and methodological approaches to spirituality and its understanding in music therapy. [gtsiris@qmu.ac.uk] **Prof Gary Ansdell** is Professor at Grieg Academy of Music, Bergen; honorary Professor and Senior Research Fellow at Exeter University; Adjunct Professor at University of Limerick; an Associate of Nordoff Robbins, UK, where he is Convenor of the MPhil/PhD programme. Gary is author/co-author of seven books on music therapy/music and health and joint editor (with Tia DeNora) of the book series *Music and Change* for Ashgate Publishers. [G.Ansdell@exeter.ac.uk]

### Publication history:

Submitted 11 Nov 2019

Accepted 14 Nov 2019

First published 24 Nov 2019

### ORIGINS

We warmly welcome you to this special issue of *Approaches*. Spirituality is a shared area of interest for many disciplines that explore the role of music in human life, including music therapy, ethnomusicology, music education, music philosophy and theology. Interdisciplinary dialogue in this area, however, has been limited. Responding to this situation, and with an explicit focus on spirituality and music in relation to wellbeing and education, this special issue brings to the fore ideas, questions and debates that often remain hidden within the confines of each discipline.

The vision underpinning this special issue originates in the 2017 conference 'Exploring the Spiritual in Music: Interdisciplinary Dialogues in Music, Wellbeing and Education' which took place at the Nordoff Robbins London Centre. Co-organised by the UK music therapy charity Nordoff Robbins and the international network Spirituality and Music Education (SAME), and according to the ethos of the Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference Series (Pavlicevic, 2014; Spiro, 2017; Spiro & Schober, 2014), this event offered a platform for interdisciplinary and cross-institutional thinking within, around and beyond music therapy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the conference attracted over a hundred scholars, researchers, practitioners and students from different disciplinary, geographical and spiritual spaces. It became a meeting point of diverse and, at times, contrasting spiritualities and musics

<sup>1</sup> Two years after the 2017 conference, and under the leadership of June Boyce-Tillman, SAME developed into the International Network for Music, Spirituality and Wellbeing, which aims to embrace the social, personal, spiritual and political aspects of wellbeing.

fostering constructive debates and generating a 'place' alive with multiple meanings (Hendricks, 2018; Hendricks & Smith, 2019). The presentations were grouped into six main themes: i) Uncertainties and controversies, ii) Culture, politics and identity, iii) Learning and teaching, iv) Music, imagery and reflection, v) Musicians, thinkers and approaches, and vi) Living and dying. These themes offered a framework for critical and constructive dialogue regarding the multiple manifestations and understandings of the spiritual in music across different practices, settings and cultures.

## HYBRIDITY

Building on the ethos and the themes of the 2017 conference, this special issue brings together and takes forward diverse theoretical perspectives, practices and methodological approaches. Our vision, as chairs of the conference and editors of this publication, has been to move beyond conceptual and methodological conventions, and to offer an open space for exploring the spiritual in music.<sup>2</sup> In this context, 'the spiritual' is intentionally used as a term reflecting our commitment to a hybrid spiritual discourse. 'The spiritual' implies our conceptualisation of spirituality as a 'boundary object' in music therapy and in related fields; "a hybrid construct which affords the co-existence of unfinished spiritualities as well as their multiple and heterogeneous translations" (Tsiris, 2018, p. i).

Instead of applying an overarching definition of spirituality, this edition on the one hand recognises the plasticity of spirituality and its adaptations to local music practices, and on the other hand highlights how spirituality retains some commonly recognisable, even if fuzzy, patterns across intersecting disciplinary, professional and cultural contexts. As such, we are interested in the multiplicity of the spiritual in music and its heterogeneous translations and applications.<sup>3</sup> This has resulted in a rich edition embracing varying writing styles, perspectives, methodological approaches and perspectives. In each case, authors were asked to communicate openly their stance and intention of writing, and to position their arguments accordingly.

## Contents overview

This special issue begins with Sara MacKian's paper. Based on her keynote presentation in 2017 and drawing on her research experience as a human geographer (e.g., Bartolini, Chris, MacKian & Pile, 2017; MacKian, 2012), this paper explores how and where the spiritual might be encountered in unexpected ways. MacKian advocates for an openness towards the challenges of encountering and of articulating spirituality. Re-orientating our analytical lens to the everyday, she stresses the importance of mystery in our engagements with spirituality, music and wellbeing in everyday life. Responding to MacKian's paper, Lars Ole Bonde offers his perspective as a music therapist with specific reference to Guided Imagery and Music (GIM). Moving beyond a static-content-oriented approach, Bonde proposes a more dynamic process and interpersonal understanding of

---

<sup>2</sup> Pointing to a similar questioning of methodological conventions, Gary's work with Tia DeNora (e.g., DeNora & Ansdell, 2014, 2017) opens a space where some of the unobservable processes by which music helps can be traced and become known.

<sup>3</sup> Further details about the proposed hybrid spiritual discourse and the notion of spirituality as a 'boundary object' can be found in Giorgos' ethnographic study which explores the performance of spirituality in everyday music therapy contexts (Tsiris, 2018).

spiritual/transpersonal experiences with music.

The emerging interplay between the extraordinary and the ordinary, and the open-ended stance adopted by MacKian and Bonde, is equally characteristic of the other papers contained in this issue. Bolette Daniels Beck and Martin Lawes, both using case examples from their GIM work, explore the concepts of 'sacred moments' and of spiritual experiences. Kate Binnie explores the 'thin place' between life and death through a case study of compassion-focused relational approach to music therapy with a hospice patient and she outlines a feasibility study protocol.

Some authors, such as Astrid Notarangelo and Adam Kishtainy, present personal accounts of integrating spirituality in their own music therapy work. Other authors consider spirituality in relation to emerging research findings and literature themes from diverse disciplinary spaces. Efrat Roginsky and Cochavit Elefant, for example, consider spirituality in relation to transformative experiences of music as emerged in their research with parents of children with cerebral palsy and multiple disabilities. Focusing on spirituality from a different disciplinary perspective, that of metal music, Owen Coggins reviews some of the controversies that have characterised public, political and research debates on health and metal music since the 1970s especially in the US and the UK. Drawing on his own ethnographic study of violence, religion and health within the music culture of drone metal, Coggins explores how noise and extreme music can be positive, yet under-appreciated, resources for listeners' health. On the other hand, Giorgio Scalici's ethnomusicological study of music among the Wana people of Morowali in Central Sulawesi explores how music connects the human world and the hidden world of spirits and emotion. More specifically, he explores the role of music as a ritual marker transforming ordinary time into mythical/ritual time and allowing the healing of the patient and the community through emotional catharsis. Lastly, Faith Halverson-Ramos' opinion paper explores music in relation to gerotranscendence. With a focus on the US social context, Halverson-Ramos discusses how music can be vital to a culturally responsive approach to ageing and transpersonal growth.

These articles are followed by three book reviews by Tia DeNora, Marilyn Clark and Leslie Bunt. Two of these reviews concern the books *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* by Coggins (2018) and *Spirituality and Music Education: Perspectives from Three Continents* by Boyce-Tillman (2017) which were launched at the 2017 conference. The special issue concludes with a report by Karin Hendricks and Tawnya Smith offering a reflective overview of the 2017 conference alongside some photographic material. For the readers who did not attend the conference, this report may serve as a useful introduction to this special edition.

## Filoxenia

This special issue would not have been possible without the diligent work of the editorial board who also served on the scientific committee of the 2017 conference: Lars Ole Bonde, June Boyce-Tillman, Owen Coggins, John Habron, Frank Heuser, Koji Matsunobu, Simon Procter, Neta Spiro, and Liesl van der Merwe. We thank each and every one of them for fostering a dialogic and reflexive peer-review space where scientific rigour was balanced by a genuine spirit of curiosity and openness towards aspects of the spiritual in music which are perhaps located on the edge of existing theoretical frameworks and may be more slippery to the scientific eye. Moving beyond polarisations and a

sense of 'mutual suspicion', which may be observed between different professional fields in the wider music, wellbeing and education arena (Tsiris, Derrington, Sparkes, Spiro & Wilson, 2016), the peer-review process was characterised by an awareness of the multiplicity of the spiritual in music and a willingness to enable diverse voices to enter the professional discourse and come together. We argue that this coming together of different voices is a key contribution of this special issue given that such papers would typically, and perhaps more comfortably, remain within the conceptual and methodological boundaries of their profession and discipline.

This special issue fostered an epistemological culture of *filoxenia* (etymology from the Greek *filo* [= love] + *xenos* [= stranger]); a spirit of openness, trust and generosity between authors and reviewers. Instead of being uninvited or misunderstood guests in each other's disciplinary discourses (Frank, 2009; Tsiris, 2013, 2014), authors and reviewers collaborated as partners and equally important co-creators of this interdisciplinary environment. This seemingly romantic view was, of course, underpinned and shaped by the negotiations and controversies as well as the uncertainties and vulnerabilities which are inherent to each field's professional and disciplinary advancements.

Mercédès Pavlicevic, who sadly died a few months after the 2017 conference, has been a vital voice in music therapy articulating vividly some of these negotiations and controversies around our cultural constructions of music, health and healing (Stige, 2018). In her article with Cripps, she characteristically proposed a 'messy hybridity' to reflect the sociocultural and cosmological fusions required for contemporary music therapy practices:

Straddling the South and the Global North, we propose that Western (and at times bio-medically informed) healing and health practices might well consider reclaiming and re-sourcing their own, and other, traditional and indigenous healing cosmologies, whatever their respective and situated ideologies and ontologies. Despite apparent (and possibly intellectual and ideological) segmentations and separations of disciplines by Western scholarship and economics, we propose that 'the ancestors' and 'the aspirin' need to embrace rather than view one another with suspicion. Just possibly, each might become enriched (and discomforted) by the silenced coincidences of one another's desires to know and experience our common humanity through music. (Pavlicevic & Cripps, 2015)

With the publication of this special issue, we pay tribute to Mercédès, a close colleague and dear friend to both of us. Mercédès was instrumental in the establishment of the Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference series and contributed to the scientific committee of the 2017 conference. Although Mercédès had become too unwell to contribute to the editorial board of this special issue, her commitment to exploring music and spirituality in-context and in-action informed our editorial work and indeed remains a passionately alive voice within us. We are grateful for everything that Mercédès brought and shared with us:

The fruit of Mercédès' endeavour is becoming clear and is our gift from her: an influential legacy of thinking and practice for music therapy and beyond music therapy... but also a life-lesson for us all:

Stir it up... get moving... be bold... share your energy... be naughty sometimes and shake things up... but also... create beauty together, party, believe in people, cherish each other...

And also... know when to leave, know how to let go – with dignity and grace.  
(Ansdell, 2018)

We encourage readers to keep Mercédès' endeavour and gift in their mind and in their heart as they turn the pages of this issue.

## LEAVING THE DOOR OPEN

Looking ahead, we hope this special issue expands our horizons by generating new questions and directions in our explorations of the spiritual in music. We hope it becomes a springboard for further practice, theory and research developments questioning traditional assumptions and venturing beyond familiar knowledge and methods. Marking also the tenth anniversary of *Approaches*, this publication reflects the journal's ongoing commitment to the advancement of music therapy through interdisciplinary dialogue bridging local and global aspects of music, health and wellbeing.

As we close this editorial, we leave the door open... and we call for a critical engagement with the creative uncertainties characterising the evolving interdisciplinary landscape of the spiritual in music.

## REFERENCES

- Ansdell, G. (2018). Mercédès' endeavour. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 18(2). Retrieved from <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2526>
- Bartolini, N., Chris, R., MacKian, S., & Pile, S. (2017). The place of spirit: Modernity and the geographies of spirituality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(3), 338-354.
- Boyce-Tillman, J. (Ed.). (2017). *Spirituality and music education: Perspectives from three continents*. Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd.
- Coggins, O. (2018). *Mysticism, ritual and religion in drone metal*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- DeNora, T., & Ansdell, G. (2014). What can't music do? *Psychology of Well-being*, 4(1), 23.
- DeNora, T., & Ansdell, G. (2017). Music in action: Tinkering, testing and tracing over time. *Qualitative Research*, 17(2), 231-245.
- Frank, A. W. (2009). *The renewal of generosity: Illness, medicine, and how to live*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hendricks, K.S. (2018). *Compassionate music teaching*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hendricks, K.S., & Smith, T.D. (2019). The 4th Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference and the 4th International Spirituality and Music Education (SAME) Conference 'Exploring the spiritual in music: Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, wellbeing and education'. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy, Special Issue 11* (1), 191-200.
- MacKian, S. (2012). *Everyday spirituality: Social and spatial worlds of enchantment*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pavlicevic, M. (2014). Afterword: Knock knock... *Psychology of Music*, 42(6), 894-896.
- Pavlicevic, M., & Cripps, C. (2015). Muti music – In search of suspicion. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 15(3). Retrieved from <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2286>
- Spiro, N. (2017). The Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference Series. In G. Tsiris, G. Ansdell, N. Spiro, & O. Coggins (Eds.), *Exploring the spiritual in music: Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, wellbeing and education* (p. 11). London: Nordoff Robbins.
- Spiro, N., & Schober, M. F. (2014). Perspectives on music and communication: An introduction. *Psychology of Music*, 42(6), 771-775.
- Stige, B. (2018). Moments and open doors: A tribute to Mercédès Pavlicevic. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 18(2). Retrieved from <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2524>
- Tsiris, G. (2013). Voices from the ghetto: Music therapy perspectives on disability and music (a response to Joseph Straus' book "Extraordinary measures: Disability in music"). *International Journal of Community Music*, 6(3), 333-343
- Tsiris, G. (2014). Community music therapy: Controversies, synergies and ways forward. *International Journal of Community Music*, 7(1), 3-9.
- Tsiris, G. (2018). *Performing spirituality in music therapy: Towards action, context and the everyday*. Doctoral thesis, Nordoff Robbins / Goldsmith's, University of London, London, UK. Retrieved from <http://research.gold.ac.uk/23037/>

Tsiris, G., Derrington, P., Sparkes, P., Spiro, N., & Wilson, G. (2016). Interdisciplinary dialogues in music, health and wellbeing: Difficulties, challenges and pitfalls. In M. Belgrave (Ed.), *Proceedings of the ISME Commission on Special Music Education and Music Therapy (20-23 July 2016, Edinburgh, Scotland)* (pp.58-70). Edinburgh: ISME.