

A Summary of Responses to a 2019 callout to the CEC for Spiritual, Religious or Sacred Electroacoustic Music. Susan D Frykberg, 2022. Monash University, Australia.

Full disclosure. This research was originally slated for my PhD thesis on spirituality and electronic music in the Music Department of Monash University, funded by the Australian government. However, because I did not get ethics approval beforehand for what is essentially a survey, I was not allowed to use it. Nevertheless, I did promise the CEC that I would post something of my findings, so here it is!! All quotes in the first part of this paper are from the call-out but quotes in the second half are from personal communication with specific composers.

In 2019, I put out a call to the CEC (Canadian Electroacoustic Community), to ask them to suggest or comment on spiritual, religious, or sacred electroacoustic music. My use of the three related and deliberately undefined terms cast a wide net in order to investigate whether electronic music, like so much other music, has a numinous quality. The word numinous is derived from the Latin *numen*, meaning ‘arousing spiritual or religious emotion; mysterious or awe-inspiring.’¹

I received thirty email responses from respondents mainly in England and North America and forty-eight pieces of music were suggested. The range and styles of music suggested were diverse: the 1948 *The Expression of Zaar*, by Egyptian Composer Halim El Dabh; the work of Stockhausen; a number of winners from the illustrious Bourges competition (Berndt Morris, 2012); as well as more popular pieces - Robert Fripp’s *The Gates of Paradise*; Ragnar Grippe’s *Requiem* and Steve Roach’s *The Magnificent Void*.

The comments responding to my callout were diverse as well. The actual words themselves ‘sacred’, ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ provoked some discussion, as can be seen by some of the comments I include later in the paper.

¹ The term was given its present sense by the German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto in his influential 1917 German book *The Idea of the Holy*.

What Kind of Works were Suggested?

Most works suggested related to religious texts, characters and ideas but some related to a personalized spirituality not attached to any particular religion. Of those with Christian references, four referenced liturgy (requiems, nuptial mass); seven referred to biblical or liturgical texts; two referred to Christian characters and one referred to a Christian practice (Nepsis, a purification of the heart practice from Orthodox Christianity). Two works relating to the Mormon tradition were offered.² Buddhism was referenced: Philippe Otondo's *Samath* is a soundscape composition based on recordings from a Buddhist pilgrimage.³ Jonathan Harvey based his *Ritual Melodies* on Buddhist melodies.⁴ Several works referring to the mythological character Herakles (divine Greek hero and son of Jupiter and Alcmenes) were composed by Michael Gogins.⁵ The Hindu tradition was acknowledged by Mexican composer Manuel Rocha Iturbide.⁶ He connected with an aspect of Hindu tradition in his work *Perusha-Prakriti*. (In the Samkhya tradition, Purusha is the soul, the self, pure consciousness, and the only source of consciousness. Prakriti is that which is created, it is nature in all her aspects). One work, Robert Normandeau's *Chorus*, won the prestigious Fribourg Competition for Sacred Music.⁷ The idea of a personalized spirituality, not attached to any specific religious path or tradition, which nevertheless found its way into the music, was mentioned by several composers.

While the majority of respondents referred to works where the perspective of the composer was key - i.e., composers deliberately chose material that had links to religious or spiritual paths regardless of their participation in these paths, some referred to the perspective of the listener. One respondent talked about ambient music, and how he personally found it spiritual. Monty Adkin commented:

My point about some ambient music is perhaps more to do with the listening it engenders. I suppose it poses the broader question - does music have to concern and engage with religious concepts to

² John D Moeller <https://www.moellerstudios.org/about/>

³ Philippe Otondo <https://otondo.net/>

⁴ Jonathan Harvey <https://www.fabermusic.com/we-represent/jonathan-harvey> and ndenheede (1992) Jonathan Harvey's ritual melodies, *Interface*, 21:2, 149-183, DOI: [10.1080/09298219208570605](https://doi.org/10.1080/09298219208570605)

⁵ Michael Gogins <https://michaelgogins.tumblr.com/>

⁶ Manuel Rocha Iturbide <https://www.artesonoro.net/ManuelRochaIturbide.html>

⁷ https://fims-fribourg.ch/application/files/4216/0560/5811/E_17.11.2020_Reglement_Concours_2021.pdf

be spiritual. I would say no. For example, I don't find Verdi's Requiem a particularly spiritual work - I find it more operatic.

A significant number of the respondents, while eschewing the terms religious and sacred, indicated that their own subjective interpretations of the word 'spiritual' were key to their compositional practice. They might try to imbue their music with their own personal ideas about spirituality such as beauty, transcendence, mindfulness, humility, balance, reflection, and unity. Pierre Alexander Tremblay says of his work:

A lot of music practice is spiritual. I consider most of my music to be for instance, yet very, very far from religious. As for it being sacred...Most of my works have a strong argument and are trying to search for (an aspect) the soul, like a good story telling experience. The latter are very interesting in themselves as vehicles for morale reflection, a sense of self, or worth, or right, of worth (in balance with everyone and everything else).

While some composers used words such as the above to try to articulate what they felt were spiritual in their *music*, one composer went further, saying that music just *IS* spiritual practice. Matt Rogalsky said:

I was a bit stymied by your question, because... I feel like the whole enterprise of composing and soundmaking has a spiritual element. Trying to boil it down to "deliberately spiritual" pieces seems to belittling! I remember someone asking Ken Newby whether he was a meditator, and he replied that the state of music-making fills that function for him... .. doing the music just is the spiritual practice. (bold mine).

The word 'soul' which was not specifically mentioned in the call-out was never-the-less referenced by several works including Rob MacKay in his work *Flight of the Monarchs*.⁸

⁸ Rob MacKay <https://robmackay.net/>

One cohort of composers appeared to articulate the notion of the numinous through negation. They didn't want to, or couldn't, say what spirituality was exactly. For example, Richard Power⁹ said:

I've spent a lot of time considering these questions... it's such an abstract area, and one of the reasons I'm interested in expressing it through music is that I do find it so hard to express in words.

I wonder whether this cohort would relate to the argument from writer and musicologist Marcel Cobussen who in his seminal book - *Thresholds: Rethinking Spirituality through Music*, argues that music is a threshold – a liminal space between materiality and non-materiality, emotion, and form and therefore precisely the 'sort of place' where spirituality may reside (Cobussen, 2008).

Finally, there were a few composers for whom mathematics, acoustics, and algorithms link to the spiritual, sacred, or religious. A theocentric world view where God is all in all, including mathematics, is now considered rather quaint in the secular west. Nevertheless, in the past in the west, and still today in some countries, God-centredness is fundamental. Within such a world view, relationality is key, with God at the centre and in relation to all things. The cosmos, nature, people, ethics, music, and mathematics, proportion, ratio and thus music is one way of articulating that relationship. Duke university theologian Jeremy Begbie has called this the 'Great Tradition' (Begbie, J 2007), which connects Pythagoras, Plato, Augustine and Kepler. A key figure is 6th century philosopher Boethius, whose remarkable text *De institutione musica*, dominated musical theory in medieval times and for whom the issue of formal unity and the goal of goodness for all things was crucial (Bower, C. M. 1967) .

I believe Michael Gogins refers to a modern variant of this concept when he says:

For me as an algorithmic composer, the autonomy of the process is an important element of composing spiritually focussed music. ... the "autonomy" of the process, in my opinion, guarantees a certain sense of formal unity that deepens the impact of the piece.

⁹ Richard Power <https://richardpower.net/>

How to contain the word spiritual and provide intersections between it and EA music

The large variety of responses above required some sort of way of containing the word spiritual, as well finding a way to describe *intersections* between discourse of spirituality and electroacoustic music. For this I firstly turned to a field called spiritual intelligence, a concept proposed by psychologist Robert Emmons (Emmons, R. 2000) who asserts that this is one of the many intelligences required for human flourishing and is common to all people. He articulates five categories of attributes of spiritual intelligence which can be seen below.

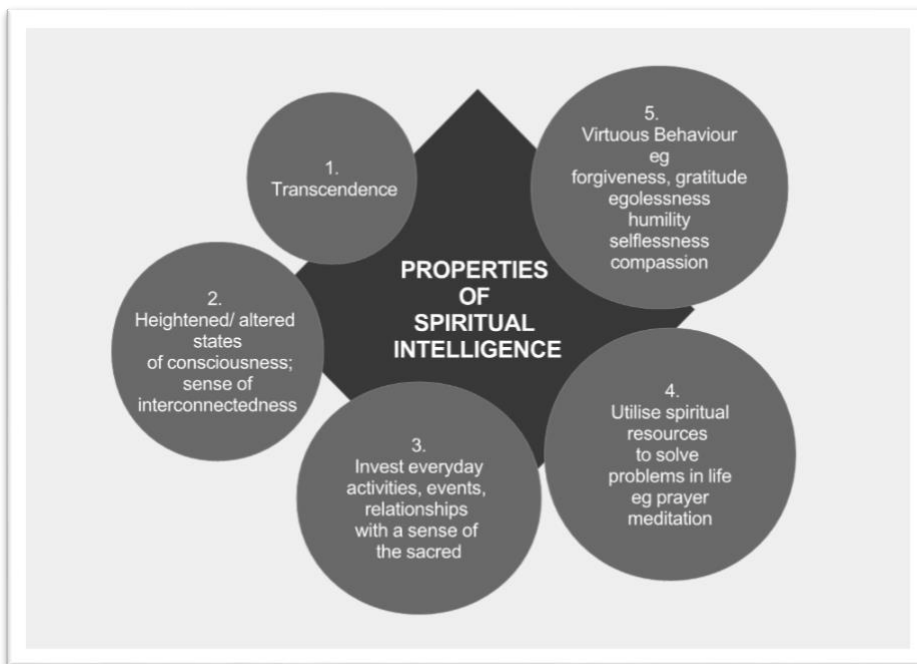


Fig One – Attributes of Spiritual Intelligence according to Emmons

Secondly, I have developed the three classes of intersections with spirituality thus framed and works of electroacoustic music. In my paper *Using Spiritual Intelligence as a Framework to link Electroacoustic Music with Spirituality* (Frykberg, 2020), I discuss these intersections - see Fig. Two. They are: *Traditional* - referring to existing texts, practices or peoples from any religion and path; *Experimental* - the nature of sound and listening is inherently spiritual therefore will have spiritual causes and effects. It also includes those composers who describe their own free approach to spirituality and do not necessarily link to any existing religion or spiritual path. The third class I call *Ancient Ways of Knowing*, where sound is thought of as a way of linking God, the cosmos, the seasons and events with the individual, through mathematics, proportions and ratios. It is

important to note that these classes refer to the approach to *spirituality*, not the style or method of music. They have been useful in distinguishing between different kinds of intersections between spirituality and electroacoustic music. For example, I would put the works of Otondo, Chion and Iturbe in the *Traditional* class since they reference Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism respectively. The *Experimental* class refers to those who are guided by their own subjective interpretation of the word spirituality, as well as those for whom sound and music is itself spiritual and requires no further explanation:; Tremblay, Rogalsky and Adkins. The final class *Ancient Ways of Knowing* has the work and thought of Michael Gogins in premiere place as he links spirituality and algorithmic music. In part two of this paper, a brief interview with Michael is given to support this claim.

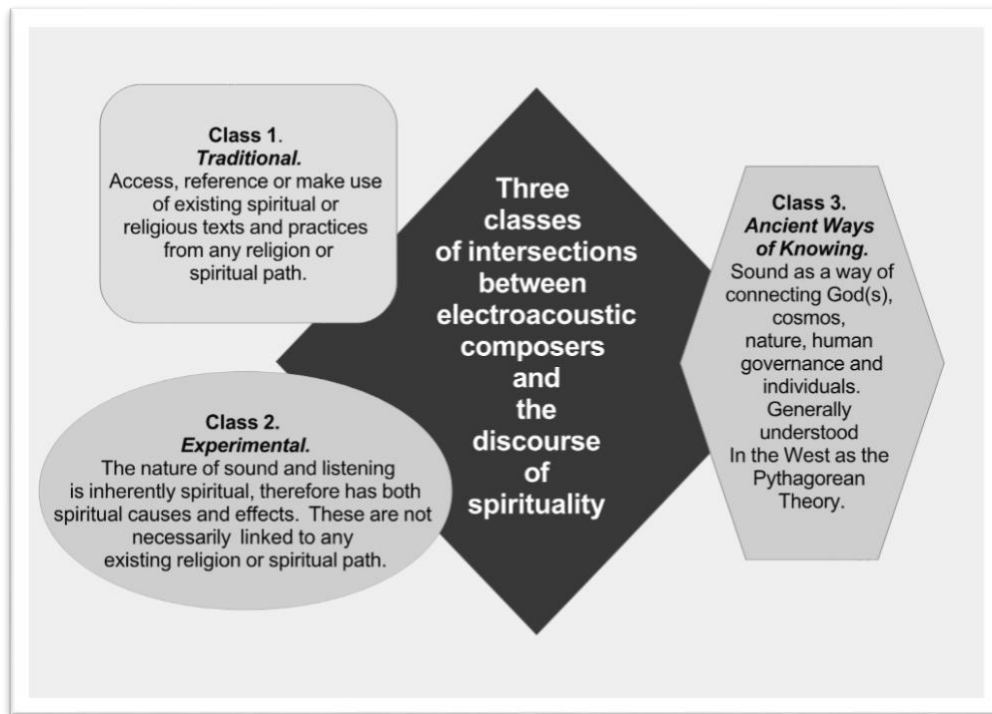


Fig Two. Three intersections between a discourse of spirituality and electronic music

Further detail from the call-out can be seen in the appendix of the paper which lists the works and composers mentioned, as well as dates composed. One slightly disturbing trend as observed in this paper is that very few women replied. I may comment on this in another article.

Part 2: Three composers in detail

In order to obtain more detail from the composer's responses, I sent out further questions to about eight composers. Three of these, representing the three classes of intersections, can be seen below.

Thanos Chrysakis, *Traditional*

Thanos Chrysakis is a practising Greek Orthodox Christian. He has articulated the relationship between a particular spiritual practice called Nepsis, a purification of the mind and heart following catharsis, and his music-making in his work Eknepsis II, which he feels, mirrors the process.

I would say that the concept of Nepsis relates in the sense that at that particular period of my life I was feeling myself undergoing a personal change close to this concept or better said the experience of Nepsis. As a consequence, this music and some other musics of mine of that period I feel they are connected to this concept, this experience. I think something has been transmitted to the music as it is inevitable the state of mind and the spiritual condition of someone affects the work...I find this concept still relevant as a cure for the several maladies in our lives and the world. ...When the mind is warmed by the heart becomes more real, more humane.

His approach asserts that a traditional spiritual practice can have effects on the music written.

Pierre Tremblay, *Experimental*

Pierre Tremblay was emphatic in response to my call-out, saying that for him, only the word spiritual was relevant. He said:

What make something spiritual. I think that there are many ways in, but it boils down to humility, balance, and as sense of unity. It is reflective. Most of my works have a strong argument and are trying to reach for (an aspect) the soul, like a good story telling experience. The latter are very interesting in themselves as vehicles for morale reflection, a sense of self, or worth, or right, of worth (in balance with everyone and everything else).

There is, in most musical experience, and what I aim for in my musicking in general, the concept of flow that is quite central. Also, of the (indicible in French: ineffable, inexpressible in words,

unspeakable but not in the taboo sense). Also, there is our good friend Kandinsky with his spiritual in the arts: child of your time, hypersensible to and in resonance with the world.

There is also the body. In all of this, quite important too, to keep it in the equation, and to reflect on its biases and influences (in all directions).

So when I compose, and I listen actively, all of these are fed into my spirituality, and I hope that some of my listeners will engage at that level. This is why I spend quality time writing titles and short, poetic, polysemic (yet in the ballpark direction) program notes. I hope some of this make sense. It is a complicated subject.

My compositional practice is definitely humbling, and humanist, and focused on transcendence, on complexity, and I hope that it comes across somehow. It is at times joyous too I think but there is always a sombre element too...

Michael Gogins, *Ancient Ways of Knowing*

Michael responded in depth to my call-out question. He is not a Christian or a member of any organized religion but he says that some of his works have a spiritual dimension, for example to praise God or to assist in contemplative prayer, He also asserts that his algorithmic music practice has a spiritual dimension. I asked Michael to elaborate in the following questions:

How do you create works that praise God?

First, in consciously intending that as the purpose of the work. Second, in trying to maintain a prayerful or contemplative attitude at times (doing this at all times is impossible for me) in the composition of the work. This is particularly important in the LISTENING phases of composition.

I then asked - How does one write music to facilitate contemplative prayer?

Facilitating contemplative prayer in any DIRECT way is usually quite impossible, because contemplative prayer is often only possible when the activities of the ego, i.e., our ordinary intentional state of consciousness, has been muted or distracted... However, I think that becoming absorbed in listening to a piece of music actually does mute or distract our ordinary inner dialog

of intentionality. If in addition the actual piece has those well-known markers of transcendence or holiness, that definitely can help. But the trickiness here is that any element of kitsch or corniness or obviousness is fatal.

Finally, his comments on how he thinks his mathematical models for composing music relate to my question on spirituality was answered as follows:

I would also like to say that I view the mathematical methods that I use for algorithmic composition as imitating Nature, not in the sense of imitating natural phenomena, but in the sense of imitating, or perhaps better said participating in, the underlying processes that manifest themselves as phenomena... For me as an algorithmic composer, the autonomy of the process is an important element of composing spiritually focussed music. By "autonomy of the process" I mean that the algorithm produces and renders the piece in one run without me editing the results in any way. This of course does NOT mean the process is truly autonomous! I spend a great deal of time, deliberate thought, and trial-and-error experimentation in designing the algorithms and in choosing the right parameters for a given piece. These are very sensitive to changes, and I make many, many trial renderings. But, once the piece runs, the "autonomy" of the process, in my opinion, guarantees a certain sense of formal unity that deepens the impact of the piece.

Chrysakis, Tremblay and Gogins exemplify three different ways in which their work links with spirituality. Chrysakis connects the orthodox tradition of nepsis with his electroacoustic practice; Tremblay consistently articulates his own personalized approach to spirituality through his music; Gogins connects the formality of algorithmic music to spirituality. I call these ways traditional, experimental and ancient ways of knowing respectively.

Conclusion

This paper summarizes the responses to a 2019 call to the CEC (Canadian Electroacoustic Community), regarding spiritual, religious or sacred electroacoustic music. Thirty detailed email responses offered both works and comments which are commented upon in this paper. The variety of responses helped me in two ways. Firstly, it made me search for a way to frame the word spirituality: which became possible via the theory of spiritual intelligence. Secondly, I was thus

able to articulate categories of *intersections* between spirituality thus framed and compositional practice which I have named, traditional, experimental and ancient ways of knowing. It is important to re-iterate here that these categories refer to the approach to *spirituality*, not the style or method of music. All the quotes in the first half of the paper can be found in the responses to the initial call-out. Some composers who responded to the call-out were further contacted with more questions and the e-mail interactions with them are the focus of the second part of the paper.

References

- Begbie, J. S. (2007). *Resounding truth: Christian wisdom in the world of music*. Baker Academic.
- Berndt, Morris, E. (2012). Building a collection in electronic music: Considerations and sources. *Music Reference Services Quarterly*, 15(1), 34-40.
- Bower, C. M. (1967). *Boethius 'The Principles of Music' An Introduction. Translation and Commentary*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Cobussen, M. (2008). *Thresholds: rethinking spirituality through music*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England.
- Emmons, R. A. (2000). Spirituality and intelligence: Problems and prospects. *The international journal for the psychology of religion*, 10(1), 57-64.
- Frykberg, S. (2020). Using Spiritual Intelligence as a Framework to Link Electroacoustic Music and Spirituality. *Organised Sound*, 25(3), 302-306.
- Otto, R., & HARVEY, J. W. (1926). *The Idea of the Holy... Translated by John W. Harvey... Fourth Impression, Revised with Additions*. Oxford University Press.

Audio links

Chion, Michel (1978) *Requiem* [vinyl]. Retrieved from <https://www.discogs.com/release/329073-Michel-Chion-Requiem>

Chrysakis, Thanos. (2011/12) *Eknepsis II* [youtube]. Retrieved from
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0LjxCkXxsk465>

Desmarais, Louis-Olivier (2017) *Abbaye* [streamed audio]. Retrieved from
<https://soundcloud.com/phonurgia-nova/louis-olivier-desmarais-abbaye>

Field, Ambrose (2007) *Being Dufay* [CD]. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/16226597>

Fripp, Robert (1998) *The Gates of Paradise* [vinyl and CD]. Retrieved from
<https://www.allmusic.com/album/the-gates-of-paradise-mw0000032144>

Gogins, Michael (2016) cycle on Herakles. [youtube]. Retrieved from
[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KkY2s_6olg\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KkY2s_6olg) Hesperides
[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfQxjpZOhfM\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfQxjpZOhfM) Ladon
[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkKV_s9mcIU&t=52s\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkKV_s9mcIU&t=52s) Telamon

Grippe, Ragnar (1996) *Requiem*. [CD [BIS](#) – BIS-CD-820]. Retrieved from
<https://www.discogs.com/release/6946089-Ragnar-Grippe-Requiem>

El Dabh, Halim (1944) *The Expression of Zaar*. Retrieved from
<https://soundart.zone/halim-el-dabh-wire-recorder-piece/>

Harvey, Jonathan (1980) *Mortuos Plango, Vivos Voco* [vimeo]. Retrieved from
<https://vimeo.com/262625848> and (1990) *Ritual Melodies* [available on request from publisher,
[format unknown]. Retrieved from <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/ritual-melodies-1504>

Hearts of Space - slow music for fast times. (ongoing) [streaming radio]. Ambient electronic music, with its chilled harmonies, slowly changing rhythm patterns and endless reverberant sound images. Retrieved from <https://v4.hos.com/programs/recent>

Hirst, David (1998) *Mon Dieu* [CD]. Retrieved from
https://electrocd.com/en/oeuvre/17174/David_Hirst/Mon_Dieu

Hawgood, Ian (general works) [streamed audio]. Retrieved from <https://bandcamp.com/tag/ian-hawgood>

Iturbide, Manuel Rocha (2005) *Purusha-Prakrti* [CD]. Retrieved from
<https://electrocd.com/en/oeuvre/31448/manuel-rocha-iturbide/purusha-prakrti>

Lewis, Andrew. (2002) *Vox Dei* [Mp3]. Sent in an e-mail conversation.

Makay, Rob (2003) *Need Without Reason* [CD]. Retrieved from <https://robmackay.net/>
and *Flight of the Monarchs* <https://robmackay.net/performancesexhibitions/>

Moore, Adrian (80s?) *Requiem* [streamed audio]. Retrieved from
<https://www.adrianmoore.co.uk/music/music.html>

Normandeau, Robert (1989) *Mémoires Vives* [streamed audio]. Retrieved from
https://electrocd.com/en/oeuvre/14381/Robert_Normandeau/Mémoires_vives

Oppenheim, Daniel (1987) *Round the Corners of Purgatory* [streamed audio]. Retrieved from
<https://danielvoppenheim.bandcamp.com/album/round-the-corners-of-purgatory-1987>

Radigue, Eliane (1978) *Triptych* [youtube]. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgN3_KXv5O8

Roach, Steve (1996) *The Magnificent Void* [CD]. Retrieved from
<https://www.discogs.com/release/15062-Steve-Roach-The-Magnificent-Void>

Rossi, Alejandro Iglesias (1996) *Angelus* [streamed audio]. Retrieved from
<https://soundcloud.com/alejandro-iglesias-rossi>

Rozzman, Akos (1978-2001) *12 Stations* [vinyl]. Retrieved from
https://2018.thewire.co.uk/news/33127/akos-rozmann_s-12-stations-released-in-its-entirety
And *Crypt with table and chairs*

Stockhausen, Karlheinz *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955/6) [youtube]. Retrieved from
<https://happymag.tv/the-electronic-genius-of-karlheinz-stockhausen/>

Tutschku, Hans (2014, 2004) *Issho Ni, Rojo*. [CD]. Retrieved from <https://tutschku.com/>

