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## MUSIC IN WORSHIP: MAKING SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH SOUND

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### KEY WORDS

community, church music, spirituality, wellbeing

## ABSTRACT

Music has played a significant role in religion and spiritual settings over the centuries and continues to be included throughout church history, forming an important aspect of worship, contributing to spiritual growth and wellbeing. This article situates itself within a wider study on Spirituality and Wellbeing: Music in the community. Drawing on narrative reflection, the authors discuss their experiences across Melbourne (Australia) and Potchefstroom (South Africa) and include some interview data from church musicians from the wider study in Melbourne in relation to how church music contributes to spirituality and impacts on wellbeing. As church musicians they argue that music in church settings can offer parishioners the opportunity to experience and express spirituality in their life through sound. They recognize and acknowledge that music through singing, playing, improvising and listening is an aspect of spiritual connection that is not confined to the institution of the church or to a religion but is concerned with the connection we feel and sense in mysterious and unknown places and spaces. The findings of this study are limited as it only focuses on the experience of the authors, hence, generalizations to other musicians or church settings cannot be made. The authors argue that music in church settings can enliven and transform worship through music in which spiritual connections can be fostered between God and man that positively engender wellbeing.

## OPSOMMING<sup>1</sup>

Oor eeue heen speel musiek 'n belangrike rol in godsdienstige en spirituele omgewings en word dwarsdeur die kerkgeskiedenis ingesluit as 'n belangrik aspek van aanbidding, wat tot spirituele groei en welstand bydra. Hierdie artikel vorm deel van 'n wyer studie oor "Spiritualiteit en welstand: Musiek in die gemeenskap". Die outeurs betrek narratiewe nabetraging as metodologie, en bespreek hulle ervaringe in Melbourne (Australië) en Potchefstroom (Suid-Afrika) asook onderhouddata van enkele kerkmusici van 'n wyer studie in Melbourne in verband met hoe kerkmusiek tot spiritualiteit in tradisionele kerkomgewings bydra en die impak daarvan op welstand. As kerkmusici redeneer hulle dat musiek in kerkverband verskeie geleenthede aan die gemeente bied om spiritualiteit in hul lewe deur klank te kan ervaar. Hulle erken en gee toe dat musiek – deur sang, uitvoering, improviseer en luister – 'n aspek is van spirituele konneksie wat nie beperk word tot die kerk as instelling of tot 'n bepaalde godsdiens nie, maar deel vorm van die band wat ons voel en ervaar in misterieuse en ongekende plekke en ruimtes. Die bevindinge van hierdie studie is beperk omdat dit alleenlik fokus op die ervaring van die skrywers. Veralgemening ten opsigte van ander musici of kerkomgewings kan dus nie gemaak word nie. Die outeurs argumenteer dat musiek in kerkomgewings herlewings kan bewerkstellig en dat transformasie kan plaasvind. Spirituele konneksies word tussen God en die mens bevorder en dit het welstand tot gevolg.

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<sup>1</sup> We wish to express our gratitude to Professor Caroline van Niekerk for her time and expertise in translating the abstract into Afrikaans.

## INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Music has been effectively employed in church settings to connect people as they seek and respond to God, thus music is seen as “a servant of the liturgy” (Beeson, 2009:1). Since the days of the Old Testament to the present, music is used to worship, praise and honor God. Music, worship and spirituality in religious settings are often used interchangeably. Cobussen (2008:117) offers the view that music is spirituality and spirituality is music where “both are earthly and divine, emerging somewhere in between”. Worship largely centers on talking to God through the spoken word and through sound and silence. In church settings, music may help foster a deeper connection to God. The Archbishops’ Commission on Church Music (1992:51) points out that “God gives music as much to those who write and propagate it as to those who perform and listen to it in church”. As music plays a significant role in religion and spiritual settings it forms a significant aspect of worship, contributing to spiritual growth and wellbeing.

This article forms part of Dawn’s (author 1) wider study at Deakin University on spirituality and well-being: Music in the community that started in 2013 in Melbourne (Australia). The purpose of the research project is to investigate the connections music has to spirituality and wellbeing and in various settings. In 2014, she gained ethical clearance to include South Africa as part of her project and began to collaborate with Alvin (author 2) through email, skype and telephone communication regarding how church music impacts on his spirituality as a church musician. In 2015, Dawn visited Alvin at North-West University (Potchefstroom, South Africa) for a week in February where their one-on-one discussion continued to inform their narrative (Cresswell, 2007; Bond & Huisman Koops, 2014). In this paper they employ narrative reflection (Cresswell, 2008) and some interview data from Dawn’s wider study with six church musicians in Melbourne between 2013-2014 to provide a snapshot of how music contributes to spirituality and impacts on wellbeing. Both authors are academics and professional church musicians (piano and organ), the interviewees work across different professions (music teacher, doctor, nurse, accountant, student, retired housewife) and are semi-professional musicians. Dawn immigrated to Melbourne in September 2000 and Alvin is now based in Potchefstroom since 2006. As church musicians (authors and interviewees), they recognize and acknowledge that music is one of God’s gifts, which has been included throughout church history through songs, dance and the playing of instruments, collectively this forms an important aspect of worship (Vaught, 2009), connecting people to each other and to God. The authors and interviewees have found music to be a platform to praise and worship God where their spirituality is not confined to the institution of the church or to religion. Rather, they are concerned with the connection found “between ourselves [themselves] and something vast, unseen, mysterious, and wondrous” (Millar, 2000:140).

The authors recognise that the small number of participants in this study is a limitation in itself, therefore no generalizations can be made to other musicians, church settings or communities. Though the authors attend the Roman Catholic and Anglican church respectively, the interviewees identified as Uniting Church (combination of Methodist and Presbyterian), Assemblies of God, Baptist Church and Pentecostal Church church goers. The authors contend that music in worship can enrich and enhance one’s connection with God and with others through music. Music has the unspeakable ability to give people the opportunity to experience

and express “their spirituality in their life that otherwise they might find difficult to access in other tangible ways” (Hays & Minichiello, 2005a:95). They argue that music in church settings can enliven and transform worship in which spiritual connections can be fostered between God and man that positively engenders wellbeing. The authors grew up in different parts of South Africa where parishioners were typically non-white. In their new places of abode where parishioners are predominantly white, as church musicians they found music transcends race, gender, colour and language. All interviewees play in churches where parishioners come from multicultural backgrounds in Melbourne where music serves to unite people in God’s house.

### **Background of the Authors and Interviewees**

Author 1 (Dawn) previously lived in Lenasia (south of Johannesburg) for more than three and a half decades. Church music was a strong influence in her family. She started playing hymns on the Lowry organ at the Anglican Church in Lenasia and later on pipe organ in Robertsham and Riverlea. Her pipe organ training under Mr. Richard Cock at St Mary’s Cathedral (Johannesburg) was undertaken during her Bachelor of Music degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. In Melbourne, she continues to share her faith and music as pianist and organist at the East Burwood Anglican Church.

Author 2 (Alvin) was born in Wynberg (Western Cape Province) and raised in Surrey Estate in the Cape Flats. He first experienced playing the Lowry organ at the Catholic Church in Welcome Estate. When at high school, he undertook piano lessons with Sister Frances of the Holy Cross Convent and played the Lowry organ at church in Welcome Estate. Whilst undertaking his Bachelor of Music of music at the University of Cape Town, his piano lecturer was Thomas Rajna. He now plays the organ and keyboard at St. Michaels’ Catholic Church in Potchefstroom.

From the six interviewees (one male and five female), one was formerly from South Africa, one from Ireland and four were Australian. Their ages ranged from 30-80’s. Three played organ and three-played keyboard/piano in church. Most learnt to play their instrument since childhood either through private lessons or at school. Each had different stories of how they came to play at their churches in Melbourne. In the main, all interviewees like the authors are not paid church musicians, rather, they share their faith and love of music by making spiritual connections through sound.

### **IN TUNE WITH HEAVEN: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Several people have written about the notion of spirituality, hence, it is difficult to clearly define it in terms of music. Rather, questions can be raised in relation to the place of music in worship and how it connects to spirituality. The concept of spirituality may be conveyed in a religious context (Fisher, 2000) where it gives meaning to life and permits the chance to explore the sacred (Dierendonck, 2011). It provides an avenue to connect to God and giving purpose to life (Cohen, 2002). Spirituality involves thinking of others and self whereby you look deep inside of yourself and your life to have a belief structure, “support for this comes through faith” (Bonny, 2001:59). The notion of spirituality cannot be easily defined; hence, Cobussen (2008) regards it

“as a (non) concept that escapes categorization, classification, and linguistic descriptions”. He further points out that the ‘spiritual’ can occur through music, when listening to music. Bryant and Verhoff (2007:2) refer to such acts of listening with intent as “appreciation or savouring”, which give people the capacity to experience the positive elements of life. In this way, music acts as a powerful medium and may be seen as a vehicle to connect with God in a deep and meaningful way.

Atkins and Schubert (2014:76), argue that spirituality appears to be something “profound and transcendent that comes to life with the musical forms”. Over the centuries, music “can serve as a sacramental vessel ... to nourish our spiritual life” (Seifert, 2011:26). Writing specifically from a Christian perspective, music has played a significant role in biblical times. It serves to give God the glory and “communicates the thanksgiving and joy of the created to their creator” (Archbishops’ Commission on Church Music, 1992:37). There are numerous places in the Bible where music (instruments) and musicians are mentioned. Burgh (n.d.) argues “the Bible abounds with evidence that music was a vital, unique, and expressive part of life in antiquity”. Music continues to pervade places of worship in both Judaism and Christianity “though musical styles and worship venues may have undergone changes over the centuries, biblically informed songs have remained a steady presence” (Friedmann, 2011:13). As music is essentially entangled with a spiritual experience (Seifert, 2011), it can serve as a medium for religion where it has its own language and ritual (Yob, 2010). Singing constitutes a key component of Christian worship and it is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament (Dowley, 2011:21). Paul also exhorts the church at Colossae to “[l]et the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (The Bible, n.d.). Through praise and worship, music may impact on one’s sense of feeling connected with one another, creating a sense of happiness and wellbeing. These positive emotions may contribute to the expanding of one’s thinking and behavioural patterns (Frederickson, 2001). This aspect is not explored in this article.

According to MacDonald, Kreutz and Mitchell (2012:10) there is a growing body of research that suggests that “music can have a significant positive effect on our health and wellbeing”. Music has strong connections to body, soul and mind and has the power to foster an enhanced sense of wellbeing and quality of life (Joseph, 2014). It can be argued that music is more than a “therapeutic tool”, it can promote wellness (Hays & Minichiello, 2005b:275). Singing in choirs, church or other social settings contributes to an improved state of wellbeing and positive health (Davidson, 2008). Lally (2009,33) found in her Australian study that mood, relaxation and self-esteem were key factors that “appears to be the most significant area of benefit” contributing to wellbeing. Within an African context, Barz (2012), researching post-genocide Rwanda, found that vocal music to the accompaniment of the *inanga* (lyre, an 11-string chordophone) contributed considerably towards healing, reconciliation and to wellbeing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this paper, narrative methodology is used as an interpretivist approach in the social sciences that involves storytelling (Cresswell 2008; Mitchell & Egudo 2003). Moen (2006) identified the narrative approach as both the phenomenon and method. When using this approach, the researcher uses narrative inquiry to ask or inquire thereby seeking a deeper understanding of “particular aspects of life experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007:4). Hence the approach “lends itself to a qualitative enquiry in order to capture the rich data within stories” (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). Gill (2001:335) affirms, “the value of stories is that while they recreate experience, they still retain the personal, cultural and historical contextual connection”. Included in the narrative is interview data undertaken by Dawn with six church musicians in Melbourne to strengthen the author’s contention that music in worship can enrich and enhance one’s connection with God and with others.

As a form of qualitative analysis, narrative inquiry often positions subjects as active participants in their research who are not “bound, static, atemporal, and decontextualized” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007:11). The authors voice and interview data represent the empirical data, invaluable to “understand[ing] how people create meanings out of events in their lives” (Chase, 2005:651). This is then interpreted to describe and explain practice as “truthful fictions” (Sandelowski, 1991:165) which is often shaped by cultural and social situated experiences (Clandinin, 2009).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This findings provide a succinct understanding of how music connects the authors and interviewees spiritually to God as church musicians and to others. It highlights the impact church music has on wellbeing in their various settings where they experience God and express His love through words and sounds (playing, singing, listening and improvising).

### **Dawn’s voice**

Growing up as a Christian in South Africa, the notion of spirituality was deeply embraced and experienced through the discipline of meditation, prayer and music in her home and community. In Melbourne, this continues as her sense of spirituality lies in her relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit by connecting with people through music church (playing, improvising and singing hymns and choruses). Spirituality can be seen as a space where we communicate with the triune God, it lies “somewhere in-between the human and the divine ... between this world and that other world, between the known and unknown” (Hofman, 2009:116-117). The connection of playing sacred music on the piano and organ takes on a form of spiritual experience between the music (score) and herself. This happens when she accompanies sacred music in church and resonates with Boyce-Tillman’s (2000) notion of spirituality and music where one is transported into another space and time dimension. During her playing, she succumbs to the Holy Spirit and improvises using a range of timbres (organ stops). From anecdotal feedback people have commented when she played the organ or piano at church in prayer meetings the music

“touched their hearts”, “it lifted their spirits” and “they felt truly connected with God and the congregation”. Through accompanying and singing of sacred music she has come to know God in a more meaningful way in that space that connects her spiritually to Him and others.

Cobussen (2008) points out, it is in that space where a sense of spirituality occurs between a musical event and the listener, a transformative moment for listener and myself. This connection of spirituality impacts on wellbeing and is highlighted in two recent case studies from the wider study (see Joseph, 2014 & Joseph, 2015). Through interview and survey data words such as “it makes me feel happy when I listen to music”, “I sing and I feel it lifts my spirits” and “music relaxes me when I am stressed” were common amongst parishioners in her 2013 study (Joseph, 2014). Similarly, the 2014 study found “just by singing, worshipping and playing and using the different instruments lifts your spirit” and “music in church can enhance your soul area, your body” and “you have joy in your heart, you’ve got God’s peace in your heart, and that brings that wholeness ... and impacts your own wellbeing” (Joseph, 2015). She draws on church music to enhance her spiritual growth and to spread God’s love and word through music where her gender or race is not the focus.

### **Alvin’s voice**

He was brought up in Surrey Estate, a group area reserved for ‘so called Coloureds’, in the Cape Flats section of the Cape Peninsula. His mother and maternal grandparents were devoted Catholics. Alvin attended Catholic schools throughout his schooling years. His own spirituality is grounded in Catholicism with its strong emphasis on the seven sacraments, each of which is an outpouring of God’s love (Greeley, 2000). As an organist in various Catholic Churches over a period of 48 years, he was privileged to convey God’s word through his music ministry. In this way, church music has provided a sonic counterpoint to his own spiritual growth. It also serves to make him feel more grounded, thus part of a “soundly organized humanity”, (Blacking, 1974:89).

Alvin often offers up prayers, hymns and secular songs as a sacrifice and offering to God. In this way, he sings and plays in the hope that his spiritual growth is enhanced gaining much understanding of God’s word through playing hymns. Many members of my current congregation in Potchefstroom (St. Michael’s) whilst processing to the altar to receive communion, spontaneously break out in what the parish priest (Very Rev. Don Bohé) refers to as “singing in the spirit”. This collective humming is done during the course of Sunday worships when he plays organ medleys. After communion an appropriate devotional hymn is sung to further strengthen and grow in the spirit. The fervor with which this thanksgiving hymn is profound.

Recently, St. Michael’s spiritual songs have been composed which stand at the interface between hymnody and secular/pop music to enhance the congregations sense of spirituality within worship. Over the years, Alvin has acquired a wide range of repertoire of hymns, which he plays from memory. This helps him to also focus on his personal communication with God. For example, he often alters the harmonization of the songs in keeping with the spirit of the texts as they appear in the same melodies in various verses. In hymns of supplication he embellish the texts with appropriate harmonizations in order to heighten their meanings and adds descant parts to penultimate verses of hymns. This causes the congregation to sing with even greater

fervour. He feels privileged to be used as God's instrument, conveying His word through singing, playing and teaching new music. He has no doubt that this has contributed towards his own wellbeing.

For many of the interviewees growing up in a Christian home or musical family influenced their playing in church. When asked the question: "How did you come to play music in church?", one organist remarked, "It is just a major part of my life". Another said, "I was following in my brothers' footsteps, both sang in choirs; my oldest brother was an organist". One interviewee (now in her 80's) started as young as 15, she recalls attending a small church and "the organist just needed a little bit of help for evensong, so initially I just played the hymns ... and that was my initiation into church music". One of the pianists who started playing in church a decade ago felt "I offer back the gifts that God gave me, I think it's very scriptural". A keyboard player found "playing is expressing that love for God and to God, in a way it is a very personal thing and private thing as well as being a corporate thing". As church musicians they experienced a sense of spiritual connection with the wider congregation and also individually to God through accompanying and using their talent in church.

For most of the interviewees, music connected them spiritually through sound. One of the keyboard players identified the need to be prayerful before playing she said, "we have a half hour of devotion as a group". This prayer time sets the tone for individuals to pray about the music and not get distracted in the 'performance' of the music rather be to drawn closer to God when performing and leading the worship. One of the organist described her connection through accompanying hymns "by seeing the congregation respond to 'beautiful' music, raising voices in praise or singing prayerfully through a worship song". Another organist found his worship was through music where the words of the hymns impacted on his sense of spirituality. He identified that "some modern hymns challenge the current world but they are not sung enough, or at all". Focussing on God is an important aspect of worship as one pianist expressed "we are all spiritual beings and sometimes it is the words that just strike you and you just go away singing that line". The power of the texts in hymns or scripture can deepen one's understanding and spiritual connection to God. As the interviewees were from a range of denominations, the keyboard player said, "though I love playing in the church band ... I love modern Christian music probably because I love rhythm, but I love the meaningful words in the old hymns". It seemed that the power of words in the hymns and choruses can impact and influence people's notion of spirituality as one interviewee remarked it is through "God's power and presence in the stories of hymns that we can draw closer to Him". Through playing and singing the interviewees felt a sense of happiness that has a positive impact on their wellbeing. One interviewee aptly points out by engaging with music in church "it just kind of takes us to another place where we don't deal with junk, we just focus on God". The day-to-day trials and tribulations negatively impact on our sense of joy and happiness and consequently robs us from living in 'tune with heaven'.



## CONCLUSION

As church musicians the data reflects the deep connection music does have when trying to serve and honor God. Though each of the voices in the findings are from different musical, ethnic, linguistic and denominational backgrounds, all agreed that music connects them to God, his word (through music and scripture) and to people. The authors who for most of their lives played the organ in churches in non-white areas found that their experience of music sharing was no different in their new places of worship as music in worship transcends socio-economic status, gender bias, linguistic barriers and ethnic differences. They believe that all people are equal in the sight of God. As music is intertwined with spiritual experiences (Seifert, 2011), it was found that singing is commonly used as a vehicle to enrich worship in church. Through singing people serve God as a community by honoring him through his word and responding to it (Petty, 2010). The findings do suggest that music in worship does make spiritual connections through sound. One interviewee (an organist) affirmed this by saying “music often caused me [her] to reflect, to think of my [her] own walk with God”. A keyboard player in the church band said, “God has meshed all these different personalities together” hence the need for inner reflection to “work in harmony with each other as musicians in order to uplift the praise and worship at the service”. Singing and listening to music to a large extent uplifts people emotionally as one of the pianist found “when people (congregation or choir) sing well it lifts me up emotionally. If they are not singing well it also has a reverse impact on me”. As musicians in church the interaction between players and congregation can effect wellbeing in a positive and or negative way. A recent study by Gridley, Astbury, Sharples and Aguirre (2011) in Australia affirms that music (singing) does have a positive impact on wellbeing.

Though the authors and interviewees serve God in different geographical locations and in different church *per se* (Roman Catholic, Anglican church, Uniting Church Assemblies of God, Baptist Church and Pentecostal Church), they all are connected through words and music expressing and experiencing God’s love through sound. As church musicians they found music has a profound impact on their wellbeing. It largely makes them happy to use their gifts for their own satisfaction and also it appears to improve the happiness of others. These findings resonate with studies on subjective wellbeing (see Cummins, 2010) in relation to happiness playing a positive role in life. Lyubomirsky *et al.* (2005) found that participants in a survey who count their blessings tend to be happier than those who do not. Blessings cannot be quantified, however, the abundant blessings, happiness, and fulfillment felt in offering ones musical service to the community for free is unquantifiable. The authors argue that music in church settings can enliven and transform worship where spiritual connections can be fostered between God and man in a positive way that engenders wellbeing. Though the realm of church music may change over time, “music is an instrument that enables Christians to worship God in the beauty of holiness and in tuneful accord, so that ultimately the whole earth may stand in awe of him” (Beeson, 2009:227). Follow-up research through observations, interviews and questionnaire data with church musicians and parishioners across the two continents (Australia and South Africa) using different genres and instruments will further inform the wider study.

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