

MUSIC AND DEATH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PLACE MUSIC HAS AT THE TIME OF HUMAN DEATH, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

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“MUSIC IS ASSOCIATED WITH death and around the time of death in a whole lot of fascinating ways, and to bring those perspectives into the picture ... might be really interesting and enriching” (Clarke, 2009). It has the power to generate transformations (Stobart, 2000) and can influence the electro-conductivity of the body, whereby acting as a bridge between the “real and the unreal”, the “conscious and the unconscious” (Alvin, 1975). These viewpoints have been repeated by a large number of people not only from the academic disciplines of music and thanatology but also from the general public. Throughout recorded history composers have chosen death as a source of inspiration for their works. From a list of many thousands perhaps I might cite a handful: *Death and the Maiden* by Franz Schubert, *Death and Transfiguration* by Richard Strauss and *The Island of the Dead* by Serge Rachmaninof. *The Dream of Gerontius* by Edward Elgar deserves a special mention, since the text by the Roman Catholic Cardinal John Newman focused on the story of a man’s death and soul’s journey into the next world. Although Elgar only set about half of the poem, completed in 1900, he believed that much of the music, including the singing angel, came about by instinct and not conscious work (Burton, 2003). The origins of composers’ inspiration have been discussed elsewhere at length (Abell, 1955; Willin, 2005) but they have consistently believed in, at the very least, an altered state being accessed for their creative moments, and the near-death experience (NDE) is possibly the ultimate such altered state. The realm of music is broadened further when such concepts as ‘The Music of the Spheres’ (Rogo, 1972) are embraced, with its implication of transcendental manifestation beyond one’s natural understanding (Khan, 1996). Occultists such as Agrippa, Macrobius, Boethius and Ficino firmly believed in music’s exceptional importance within the psyche and



its connection with the soul (cited in Tomlinson, 1993). Although the presence of such beliefs in the paranormal nature of music from earliest times does not, in itself, guarantee the validity of such a claim, it nevertheless indicates that for most of mankind’s existence music has been thought to be not only very special but also ‘magical’ in its origin and content (Combarieu, 1909; Godwin, 1987). Before leaving this all-too-brief skimming of the surface of the hidden depths of music perhaps one needs to remember that many of the ‘great and the good’ have shared a belief in music’s special place in the human psyche. These include Einstein: “If I were not a physicist, I would probably be a musician. I often think in music. I live my daydreams in music. I see my life in terms of music.” (cited in Williams, 2008) and Jung: “Deeply listening to music opens up new avenues of research I’d never even dreamed of. I feel from now on music should be an essential part of every analysis” (ibid.).

Because of the lack of available space it is not my intention to present in any detail the arguments for and against the veracity of the NDE as an actual glimpse into what lies beyond the grave. The philosopher Michael Grosso (1981) has suggested that the very concept of death has undergone radical changes, originally from a magical interpretation followed by religious definitions,

and most recently death is treated as the purely physical extinction of the brain and surrounding body. The NDE has been expounded upon at length by many authors including Blackmore (1993), Moody (1976), Sabom (1982) and more recently Corazza (2008) and Holden, Greyson and James (2009). Kenneth Ring (1984) provides further information about various overviews of the available literature. The arguments bounce backwards and forwards. The sceptics believe that ketamines, the release of endorphins, temporal lobe seizures, a lack of oxygen, increased carbon dioxide, false memories or the absence of an actual experience of death cause the hallucinations. The believers retaliate with the anomaly of 'Peak in Darien Experiences' whereby the dying patient is allegedly visited by dead people whom they believed to be alive at the time of their NDE. The argument put forward that NDEs only became known after Moody's book *Life After Life* (1976) became a best-seller is easily contradicted by such works as Albert Heim's article in 1892 listing thirty NDEs mainly from survivors of climbing accidents. Other evidence is also presented of information being known that could only have been ascertained if the patient had actually left the body at the time of clinical death. People who have undergone what might be called a 'real' NDE, as opposed to a drug-induced experience, seem to have changed lives after the event. This has been studied at length in cases of cardiac arrest patients (e.g. Schwaninger, 2002; Van Lommel, 2001).

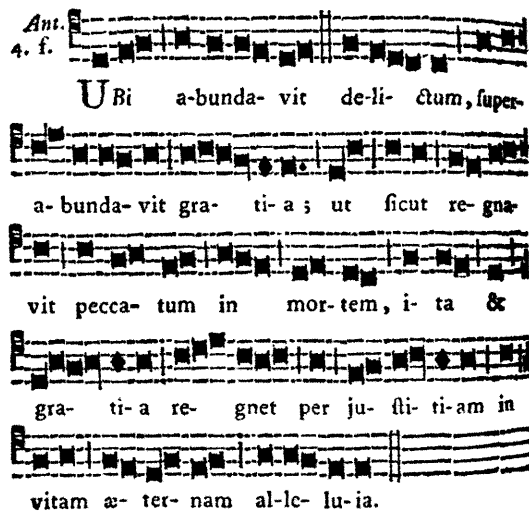
There would seem to be definite stages encountered when death approaches. The thanatologist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (*Unexplained*, 1981) specifies denial and avoidance, anger, bargaining, depression and final acceptance, when behaviour changes. A further thought provoking comment was given to me in private correspondence from a ward sister who stated: "Every nurse will tell you that clients who are about to die become alert and even lucid days or hours before their death. Sometimes that is the only sure way of knowing they are dying and treatment will fail!" However, research continues and leading exponents of the validity of the NDE, such as Peter Fenwick, Sam Parnia and Bruce Greyson, continue to delve deeper and deeper into the survival issue despite some ethical concerns

(Dieguez, 2009).

The much-quoted 'composite' case formed of the most common experiences of the NDE includes a feeling of euphoria, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), entering a tunnel with bright, guiding light, meeting either divine beings or deceased friends or family. It does not usually include music in its list of core experiences. One reason for this might be that questionnaires often do not ask whether this has been experienced (for instance: Osis, 1961; Moody, 1978). Even the 'Greyson Scale', a sixteen-point questionnaire, similarly omits music, but Greyson did draw attention to auditory phenomena, claiming that 80% of NDErs witnessed positive auditory sensations (Greyson & Liester, 2004). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead (Bardo Thödol)* (Evans-Wentz, 1927) highlights life's successive stages of consciousness with birth's 'incarnation' and death's 'disincarnation' and a literal translation of *Bardo Thödol* is 'hearing on the after-death plane'. It is said (ibid. xxviii) that sounds are heard at death and up to fifteen hours after, and a study was undertaken by one Dr Collingues in 1862. Better-known studies that have discovered musical phenomena surrounding the NDE have included Bozzano (1943), Rogo (1970; 1972), Greyson and Stevenson (1980), Gallup and Proctor (1982) and Barrett (1986 – originally 1926) as well as numerous examples in the magazine *Light*. The Gallup poll, taken over an eighteen-month period in the USA, stated that 17% of interviewees mentioned auditory phenomena, but not specifically music in every case. Similarly the Greyson and Stevenson study does not differentiate, but stipulates a 57% hit rate, albeit from a relatively small sample of seventy-eight cases. Other cases can be found scattered around the literature but they are more difficult to uncover and research. For instance, a few can be found in unpublished literature compiled by Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick and housed in the Alister Hardy Trust at the University of Wales, Lampeter, but the majority of modern examples had to be found by extensive inquiry.

Historical cases

It is not possible here to mention every case even when they have been published. Inevitably I shall have to miss out some examples, even those that some readers might find vital to a discussion of the phenomena,



and also to shorten the accounts, which sometimes run into several pages. I apologise if this causes concern and claim the much-used 'lack of space' excuse. Furthermore, some important works have not been translated into English, which presents further difficulties, especially when the original language used is also somewhat archaic. This was true of the important works of Bozzano (1943); however, some of his cases have appeared elsewhere and have therefore been included in this paper. Hopefully the references will allow interested investigators to pursue further examples as desired.

A useful starting point for "the numerous cases in which music is heard at the time of death" (Barrett, 1986, p. 96) is the 'Eton College Case', originally recorded in *Phantasms of the Living* (1886, vol. II, p. 639). A memorandum was sent to Gurney in February 1884 that was written soon after the death of a Mr L.'s (a master of Eton College) mother which occurred at about 2 a.m. on July 28, 1881. He stated that immediately after her death music was heard by several people present. These included a matron, the doctor in attendance, a friend and two other people. Curiously, Mr L. did not hear the music. It was variously described as "low, soft music, exceedingly sweet, as of three girls' voices" and as "very low, sweet singing". The outside area was checked but no one was seen or heard. Unless the people present were mistaken or there were indeed singers outside who were neither seen nor heard on immediate investigation then it would appear that the music emanated from an unknown natural

source. The services of a musicologist would have been very useful in providing greater analysis to the "sweet singing".

Remaining with Barrett (1986) is a case from the *JSPR* (1889, vol. IV, p. 181) which he believed may have had "a hallucinatory origin" (ibid. p. 99). A deaf mute, John Britton, was close to dying from rheumatic fever in Leeds in 1882. The events were described by Mr Septimus Allen, Steward of Haileybury College, and the brother-in-law to John Britton. He and his wife claimed to hear music coming from John's room. They provided considerable detail of the occurrence, even including a plan of the house to illustrate why the music could not have had its origin outside. However, their description of the music varied, as Mrs Allen described it as resembling "singing – sweet music without distinguishable words", whereas Mr Allen believed the "sound resembled the full notes of an organ or of an aeolian harp" (ibid. p. 101). After John Britton had recovered sufficiently to converse he claimed that he had "been allowed to see into Heaven and to hear the most beautiful music" (ibid. p. 100). As to whether one agrees with Barrett's "hallucinatory" origin or favours a different explanation depends on one's own belief barriers. The corroborated accounts would certainly seem to be genuine so one is left with a question mark as to the source of the music. The lack of musicological scrutiny is again apparent, since questions were not asked as to the exact nature of the music.

Perhaps I may be allowed one final case from Barrett's excellent chapter on the subject, this one being taken from the *SPR's Proceedings* (1885, vol. III, p. 92). A well-known Irish gentleman (Colonel Z.) who wished to remain anonymous recounted that at the time of his wife's death she claimed to not only hear angelic voices singing but also the specific voice of a professional singer friend (of a friend) whom they both believed to be alive and well. The colonel's wife also claimed to be able to see her although he experienced nothing. After her death he found out that the singer had indeed died eleven days before his wife and that she continued to sing during that time. He confirmed that there was no way of knowing about her circumstances during this time. Was this purely a coincidence or an example of the 'Peak in Darien Experiences'?

One cannot leave the historical cases

without mentioning the many examples that are given in the journal *Light*, which provides details of music being heard at the death of Louis XVII in the French Revolution; the author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the mystic Jakob Böhme, among many others. (Further examples, including several paragraphs being devoted to the subject, can also be found in *Light* and Doughty (1945 – see references for details.) The problem that arises from these cases is the lack of specific information concerning the music. Expressions such as “mysterious music”, “divine music”, “beautiful music”, “heavenly music” etc. abound notably in the Spiritualist literature. However, it is not just this type of writing where such descriptions exist, as Heim (1892) also wrote about “heavenly music” being heard at the time of life-threatening climbing accidents (Grof & Halifax, 1977). The musicologist Joscelyn Godwin (1987) presents many examples from historical sources of angels singing, but there is a dearth of information concerning exactly what and how they were singing. Cultural elements within the society of the times and places seem to dictate the content on the rare occasions that specifics were provided. Therefore, the strength of religious beliefs in pre-modern Europe further enhanced by the visual arts no doubt influenced the number of harp-playing angels that were encountered. To break away from this stereotypical concept it was therefore necessary to look at more modern cases where such concepts may, and only ‘may’, not be so prevalent.

Modern cases

For more recent cases I relied on the literature once more, but I also made direct contact with people who claimed to have heard music in an NDE (see below). A debt of gratitude must be made to D. Scott Rogo (1970; 1972; 1989), whose works provided an impressive starting point for the discovery of many examples. He believed that the relative scarcity of accounts of such experiences might be due to the lack of intimacy in modern hospitalised death situations, which could be contradictory to psychic functioning, and that they may not be reported because researchers did not seek them out. He favoured the term ‘transcendental’ and cited several examples where he believed such music was experienced, from the researches of

Robert Crookall in the 1960s and Raymond Moody in the 1970s (Rogo, *ibid.*). Rogo took the subject further by providing examples that he uncovered himself. For instance, his ‘Case no. 34’ (Rogo, 1970), from 1966, recounted a death-bed scene where “the room was suddenly filled with the sound of an organ playing and voices singing a hymn”. In a follow up to this event, a witness wrote that the hospital matron denied that services were held in the Chapel there by nurses, and affirmed that “the music was so powerful it vibrated through the floor and up through the walls of the large waiting room and *gradually faded out*” (*ibid.* p. 54). A further example of music heard at an NDE from 1968 came from the brother of a deceased man who spoke of the joy his brother felt at hearing music during an unconscious period just prior to his death (*ibid.* p. 136-7).

Important though Rogo’s work is, he is not the only person to have discovered examples of music during the NDE. Margot Grey (1985) found in a UK study that 11% of NDErs heard the “music of the spheres” and extensive examples are quoted on the internet by Kevin Williams (2008). Although these examples are not explored in depth they nevertheless describe a wide range of different experiences. He summarises his correspondents’ experiences in words that remind one of the imprecise language used in the past cases, but perhaps words are not able to convey the immensity of the experience: transcendental, unearthly harmonic beauty, angelic, sublimely beautiful, exquisite harmonies, heavenly, a celestial choir of angels, a tone so sublimely perfect, joyous and beat-less melody, an orchestra of voices, the ‘Music of the Spheres’, hymns to God, mystical tones, harmonic perfection, music that transcends all thought, bells and wind chimes, celestial symphony, glorious tones and rhythms and melodies, complicated rhythms with unearthly tones, deeper and more profound than New Age music, music that is experienced from within. Furthermore, music and light/colour are synthesized together (*ibid.*).

A few people have expressed their NDEs of music in more depth and have spent time analysing the occurrence. Gilles Bédard spent five months in hospital “on the brink of death” with Crohn’s disease in 1973. During this time he heard powerful music that was to change his life as he sought to reproduce it. He found the

nearest he could get to it was a combination of Tangerine Dream's 'Mysterious Semblance at the Strand of Nightmares' from the album 'Phaedra' and Steve Roach's 'Structures from Silence' (Bédard, 2009). He claims that Steve Roach told him that he had an NDE and had tried to recreate the sounds he heard when he was "in the light", but it has not been possible to verify this statement.

Another interesting case is that of Tony Cicoria, which has been written about by Oliver Sachs (2007). Briefly, this New York surgeon was struck by lightning in 1994, which led to an insatiable desire to play piano music which came to him in dreams. He evidently had had no interest prior to this. This case is different from others, since the music is widely available (Cicoria), but it does not follow in the 'angelic' tradition, sounding quite firmly from the Romantic nineteenth-century Western piano tradition of Chopin and Liszt. Far better known than Cicoria is the composer Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951), who suffered a cardiac arrest in 1946 and was considered clinically dead for an uncertain period of time. While he was still in hospital he began work on a String Trio (op. 45) which may have been an attempt to reproduce the various stages of his journey in the afterlife. However, it needs mentioning that he had already been commissioned to write the work before his collapse and had made some tentative plans for the music. Despite Schönberg having described the piece as a "humorous representation of my sickness" (Sherry, 2005), many people have interpreted the work as a musical NDE, with sections representing the NDE itself followed by the return to life. Corazza and Terreni (2005) take this further with an implication of peace and calmness; dialogue and meeting with others; and other transcendental experiences. The music is atonal and difficult to play and listen to by an untrained ear, which is in complete contrast to Marcey Hamm's music composed as a result of her suffering an NDE during a road traffic accident in 1985. She spoke of being "engulfed" in music and colour after a period of recovery and that, having made the music public, she was approached by a man who "told me that he had open heart surgery seven years prior and was pronounced dead for sixteen minutes. He told me that during the time he was dead, this music he heard [i.e. Marcey Hamm's music] was the

same music he heard while he was dead" (Hamm, n.d.). The music is synthesized and consists of concordant, homophonic choral effects that are slow and sustained and dwell on distinct bass and treble pitches. She maintains that the music, which has a duration of one hour and twelve minutes, could be used for meditation or path-working (visualised meditation) of a "suitable" nature. Coincidentally I have been present when the music was indeed being used for this purpose without the percipients knowing its background information.

Of the greatest interest to me was the prospect of finding cases that I could research directly through conversation and correspondence with surviving NDErs. In this respect I suffered some disappointments, since I was not allowed details from hospital staff of patients who may (or may not) have had NDEs. I contacted several surgeons and anaesthetists who were interested in my project but could not arrange the openings I desired, perhaps understandably. I also contacted a number of hospices and similarly met with a lack of information. Conversations with Bruce Greyson, Penny Sartori, Sam Parnia and other researchers in the field were helpful, but similarly did not lead to new unpublished cases. Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick sent me some cases that contained a number of NDEs where music was heard. Unfortunately these were mainly around forty years old and it was not thought appropriate to contact the persons concerned, if indeed they were still alive. I placed an advertisement in *Psychic News* (18th July, 2009) requesting accounts of psychical musical experiences around people when close to death and received no replies! Information via a conference organised by the Scientific and Medical Network and from the Alister Hardy Trust in Lampeter was also useful, but not in providing new cases. However, there were nevertheless some successes in finding new cases and one in particular since it came about as a result of a somewhat bizarre coincidence.

Whilst attending a rehearsal in 2008 for a public performance of the Rodrigo Guitar Concerto by one of my students, I happened to chat to a musician (David Ditchfield) who was a stranger to me, whose first classical work was evidently going to be performed in the same concert. To my utter amazement he explained

that it was composed as the result of a dramatic NDE. I later heard the work and interviewed him about the experience (8th May, 2009). He explained that his coat was trapped in the door of a departing train and that he was dragged under the train for some distance. His injuries were substantial and life-threatening. He subsequently decided to record the experience by a sketch that developed into a canvas painting and then he began receiving messages from his subconscious (or spirits – he was unclear about which) to put these ideas into music. Although he had some experience of pop music he had never attempted anything on such a grand scale himself. The ideas “seemed to come from elsewhere and easily” and even finding performers seemed to “fall into place”, which was no mean feat considering the work required an orchestra and soloist. The work *The Divine Light* is harmonically concordant, slow and sustained. Similarities can be found in the chamber works of Ralph Vaughan Williams. He believes that his life has been changed in a positive way because of this experience and that he must now embrace a new musical direction from his previous world of pop music.

Soon after this interview a number of other cases came to my attention not related to my connection with David. I was approached to participate in a BBC Radio 4 documentary, first broadcast on 14th July 2009. During the programme the violinist Paul Robertson mentioned his own fairly recent NDE, when he heard what he described as “ragas”. As a result of this programme I was also invited to attend the first public performance, on 6th July 2009 in Winchester Cathedral, of John Tavener’s *Towards Silence* – a work composed to “explore the nature of consciousness and the process of dying” after Tavener’s own close brush with death. It was inspired by Rene Gueron’s book *Man and his becoming according to the Vedanta* and consists of a meditation on the four states of Hindu Atma, namely, the waking, dreaming, deep sleep and that which is beyond (‘Turiya’) (Tavener, 2009). The work for four string quartets and Tibetan bowl was performed as a meditation and the audience were encouraged to close their eyes and let go of their normal waking consciousness. A deep feeling of peace prevailed.

I was also contacted via email by people

who were willing to share their NDEs because of my particular emphasis of music phenomena. Ann spoke of a heart attack in 2009 when she explained with difficulty: “The music isn’t heard but lived. You hear it, see it, taste it, FEEL it. It isn’t heard but experienced”. She found words were inadequate to explain it. Another correspondence (Leahsandra) spoke of an experience she had in 1998 which she thought was “Elven” music or “similar to Enya ... New Age music ... but much more ... It seemed to be coming from all around, surrounding me, above me, below me” (private correspondence). Sharon told me that after a minor operation in 1997 she entered a trance and heard what she described as the “the music of the spheres ... disjointed set of musical chords came together to sound like the world’s biggest and most angelic orchestra”. In 1981 Mike experienced “massed waves of sound” which his friends couldn’t hear. He specified that it was a different sensation to that which he experienced when smoking marijuana but had some similarities with having had too much psilocybin mushroom wine. These people were unanimous in believing that their experiences were genuine and not part of a drug-fuelled hallucination.

Further discussion

Examples from historical and recent sources have been presented which, it is hoped will allow, at the very least, further scrutiny by interested readers. In much the same way as different researchers place different interpretations on visual material, the same can be maintained of musical phenomena. As previously mentioned, William Barrett believed that at least some of the cases might be hallucinatory, but Scott Rogo importantly drew implications of survival from his findings. These can be categorised as follows:

- The music heard is felt to be beyond the percipient’s “imagination and creative aptitude, and to be caused by some external agent”. [In private conversation John Tavener told me he believed his own “inspiration” came from an “external force”.]
- During a NDE “the music was heard most vividly as human voices and seemed to issue from the ‘other world’ ”.

- The dying have heard “celestial” music and also seen apparitions.
- The “dead” have also spoken of hearing music at their own deaths.

He felt that this might come about by a “rupture in the ether” and if these interpretations are correct then one is forced to reconsider not only the nature of music but the whole issue of survival. Music does not have to be literally heard to be appreciated, as many music readers can attest with simply a music score before them, so it is possible, as Rogo would maintain, that the music may have a different source other than vibrations (sound waves) entering our brain via the ears. The avant-garde composer John Cage used to quote a Native American Indian belief that music sounded permanently in much the same way as looking or not looking at a landscape doesn’t mean it’s not still there (cited in Dickinson, 2001, p. 4). A continuation to this idea might be explored in the minimalist music of Terry Riley that allegedly produces the sensation of a loss of time awareness as one becomes one with the music (ibid., p. 44).

So where does this leave us? It would appear that from the cases presented, and the very many more that were not discussed here, that from the people who have claimed to have had a NDE about 11% experience music during the occurrence. The music is often of a type that would not be listened to by the percipients in their normal healthy lives and it is often described as “divine” and beyond verbal description. Precision as to instrumentation, tonality, rhythm etc. is usually absent from the recollections since the sensations are more of a feeling rather than simply *hearing* music. Before the modern period the source of the music was believed to be God or angelic beings, but this idea has diminished somewhat in arguably more enlightened times, although not entirely. Try as we might to pin down the actual significance and origin of the NDE and the effect that music has upon the psyche within this experience or indeed outside of it, intangibility would still seem to be the dominate factor in its understanding. This will probably remain the case until a greater emphasis is given to what must ultimately be the most important factor in our brief lives, namely what happens, if anything, after physical death.

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THE HOWLER: A GHOST DETECTOR

PETER HALLSON

HEREWARD CARRINGTON (1880-1958) devoted his life to psychical research. He was fortunate enough to have witnessed the physical phenomena produced by the medium Eusapia Palladino when he was part of a three-strong SPR team which held carefully controlled sittings with her in Naples in 1908, and the records of these experiments are certainly worth reading (Feilding et al., 1909). Carrington's experience with Eusapia must have enhanced his interest in séance-room phenomena and maybe this was the incentive which led him to build a device which he named 'The Howler' (Carrington, c. 1939). Few details remain about the Howler save that it possessed a number of electronic valves, a coil and a loudspeaker. It

was housed in a case similar in size and appearance to an old-fashioned portable gramophone and was capable of emitting a piercing wail if anyone approached it. The Howler was built as séance-room apparatus not only to detect fraud but to detect non-material entities as well.

Two early psychical researchers, Prof. H. H. Price and Raynor Johnson, suggested that between mind and matter there may exist an intermediate state possessing some of the properties of both, and that this state, sometimes dubbed 'psychic aether', might be the fabric of apparitions, ectoplasm and materialisations – assuming, of course, that they are all not simply hallucinations (Johnson, 1961). Support for this