MUSIC AND SPIRITUALISM

by Melvyn J. Willin

ABSTRACT

A substantial study of the place of music in Spiritualism was carried out with special reference to twentieth-century musical mediums. Documentary information was sought for deceased persons' abilities in this field, and direct contact was made with the living via a questionnaire, letters, telephone conversations and recorded interviews. Although some mediums produced music that seemed to be beyond their 'normal' capabilities, none of them provided authenticated evidence of having been contacted directly from the spirit world.

INTRODUCTION

Music plays a role in many aspects of life and in most religions, and Spiritualism is no exception. The singing of popular songs and well-known hymns has long been thought conducive to binding people together and, in the example of Spiritualism, to encouraging the communication from spirits. Sceptics would argue that in the dark conditions the singing might be used to obliterate the sounds of the medium's confederates entering the room, trap doors opening, and so on.

Musical instruments have been used to 'prove' the presence of 'spirits' when they have been played without physical contact, and outstanding musical feats have been achieved using instruments that mediums have claimed little technical ability upon.

Other mediums have spoken of direct contact with the spirits of departed composers and performers. They have played their music or even written it down allegedly under dictation from these discarnates. Sometimes information about composers and their works has been conveyed from an allegedly spirit source.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND MEDIUMS

In the mid nineteenth century the Davenport brothers became widely known in Spiritualist circles for their staging of feats involving musical instruments. From the inside of a cabinet they would escape from their bindings and play a variety of musical instruments, including a guitar, trumpet and tambourine. As they were professional escapologists, the slipping of bonds would not have posed many problems for them, nor would re-securing themselves after having played the instruments. The quality of their musical performances has not been recorded. They never claimed a spiritual origin for their displays and referred to them as entertainments. Their props could have been purchased from such profitable suppliers of trick instruments as Ralph E. Sylvestre's of Chicago. Methods of achieving such feats involved prowess in escapology (Dingwall & Price, 1922).

D. D. Home produced music from accordions at various times under experimental conditions arranged by Sir William Crookes, and a similar instrument can be found in the office of the Society for Psychical Research in

London. Crookes spoke of a large, well-lit room with a new accordion, bought by him personally to allay suspicions of trickery, enclosed in a wire cage. As cited in Britten (1883, p.147):—

...it [the accordion] was held suspended in the cage by one of Home's hands extended over and resting upon the upper wire of the cage. This was under the table, but in such a position that the company could witness all the proceedings; Professor Crookes' assistant being permitted even to go under the table and give an accurate report of what was going on.

In this position there was first the regular accordion movements and sounds with the instrument suspended from Home's hand; then it was taken out and put in the hand of the next sitter, still continuing to play; and finally, after being returned to the cage, it was clearly seen by the company generally, moving about with no one touching it.

Crookes continued (ibid.):-

This was repeated a second time after a short interval. Mr. Home presently reinserted his hand in the cage and again took hold of the accordion. It then commenced to play, at first chords and runs, and afterwards a well-known sweet and plaintive melody, which it executed perfectly in a very beautiful manner. Whilst this tune was being played, I grasped Mr. Home's arm below the elbow, and gently slid my hand down it until it touched the top of the accordion. He was not moving a muscle. His other hand was on the table, visible to all, and his feet were under the feet of those next to him.

This account was authenticated by A. R. Wallace, F.R.S., to have been a true description of a séance that took place in 1869 in the home of a Miss Douglas at South Audley Street, London (cited in Campbell Holms, 1925, p.304).

James Randi has suggested (Randi, 1995) that Home probably concealed a tiny harmonica in his lips to achieve unknown musical effects—this is far-fetched in the extreme!

Other mediums producing spirit music from instruments included the Eddy brothers, Jonathan Koons, John Tipple, and many others. The well-known medium Stella Cranshaw was tested by Harry Price in the 1920s and produced music from a bell and a harmonica enclosed in a reportedly fraud-proof table (Stemman & Wilson, 1975).

INSPIRED PERFORMERS

The French medium George Aubert claimed to have only a very basic ability on the piano, yet when in trance he was 'possessed' by the spirit of Mehul and able to play difficult works by many composers. He was subjected to several experiments at the Institut Général Psychologique in France (Anon, 1906, p.301):—

Two experiments have been tried with M. George Aubert at the Institut Général Psychologique: the first consisted in bandaging his eyes and introducing into his right ear the tube of a phonograph which played the March from Verdi's Aida, and into his left ear the tube of a second phonograph, which performed the Marche Indienne by Sellenick. In spite of this cacophony, wounding to the ears of a musician, the medium rendered in a faultless manner a sonata 'inspired' by Mozart.

The second experiment was not less conclusive. M. Aubert's eyes were free, but he had to fix them on a philosophical work placed on the music desk of the piano and to read aloud, slowly and very attentively, a whole page of this book, while his hands were quite unconsciously playing a delicious melody.

Lastly, to prove the insensibility of his hands, M. Yourievitch informed M. Aubert that he would prick his right hand while he was playing; and in the midst of a brilliant piece he thrust a needle into the left hand without causing M. Aubert to wink (sic) or to slacken by a comma the tempo of the symphony, which he finished up with a masterly chord.

A similar case can be made for Jesse Shepard (1849–1927), who was visited by a spirit who told him to develop his singing. He was soon amazing his audiences with a "basso of colossal register", and it was said that "in the highest notes it becomes a decided soprano" (Campbell Holms, 1925). One laments the lack of a recording to hear exactly how high a pitch his soprano voice achieved and how 'colossal' his bass register really was. At the age of twenty-one, after he had "passed through a frightful ordeal" (Shepard, 1870, p.33), he made his way to Paris, earning his living by demonstrating various psychic skills, but in particular by displaying musical gifts.

After consulting various French authorities, including Wertel, the Director of the Paris Conservatoire, Shepard renounced the idea of tuition, and started to become well known as a musical medium (Wisniewski, 1894). Despite some initial scepticism as to his own powers, he travelled to London, St Petersburg, Berlin, and even Australia, to give performances. He was invited by nobility to perform for them and his patrons included the Queens of Denmark and Hanover, Prince Phillip of Bourbon and Braganza; Princess Marie of Hanover, the Dukes of Saxe-Altenburg and Cumberland, and many others (Wisniewski, 1894). One of his greatest artistic achievements was to sing in the basilica of the Sacré Coeur at Montmartre in Paris in May 1889 at the clergy's request.

In 1907, after his great successes and after visits to America, he settled in London, changing his name to Francis Grierson, and discontinued his musical-medium exhibitions, devoting himself to writing essays and books on philosophy and mysticism. He died in total poverty, even having pawned a watch given to him by an unspecified king of England (Shepard, 1984).

As to the nature of his gifts: he was said to be able to give addresses in trance in English, French, German, Latin, Greek, Chaldean and Arabic; and during a séance at the Hague, Holland, in 1907 it was reported that direct voices were heard speaking through him in Dutch, Sundanese (a Javanese dialect) and Mandarin Chinese (Shepard, 1984). However, it was in musical matters that he truly excelled, claiming to be possessed by the spirits of Mozart, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Sontag, Persiani, Malibran, Lablache, Liszt, Berlioz and Chopin. It was alleged that he played the piano and organ with the piano lid closed sometimes and that he could sing through the whole range from bass to soprano.

Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) trained in Paris for an operatic career but extreme bouts of somnambulism affected her training adversely. She turned to the piano after Pierre Erard (the founder of the French pianomaking firm) loaned her a piano on the condition that she practised at his warehouse to attract prospective buyers. Her mother terminated this situation since she found Emma's ability to play music before it was requested (i.e. picked up by telepathy) frightening, with evil overtones. Emma therefore returned to England and became an actress.

It was in New York that she became involved with the Spiritualist

movement and befriended Leah Underhill (née Fox). She formed a choir but her involvement with Spiritualism became deeper and she wrote a cantata, *The Song of the Stars*, in an inspired state, quoting many examples of spirit involvement with her music (Britten, 1900).

ADVICE FROM THE SPIRIT WORLD

Mediums have not always received musical inspiration from dead composers and performers, and a wide variety of information has been conveyed through them. For instance, Mrs Leonore Piper claimed J. S. Bach to have been one of her guides and William Stainton Moses received spirit messages from Mendelssohn.

The violinist Florizel von Reuter wrote two books about the advice he received from Paganini via a type of ouija board used by his mother (Reuter, 1928; 1931), and the English eccentric Charles Tweedale wrote at length about his contact with Stradivarius using the planchette to try to discover the secret of the Italian violin-maker's varnish. Infuriatingly, the spirits mainly passed on philosophical statements and abstract comments about the after-life, which could not be verified. Even when von Reuter started to use the 'Additor' himself, the messages were usually obscure. However, on a few occasions more substantial contact was provided by Paganini. It is alleged that he gave von Reuter advice on how to finger his composition La Campanella (Reuter, 1928, pp.76–77):-

Suddenly, without any premeditation, while playing a difficult passage my fingers seemed to be impelled to abandon suddenly the fingering I had used for years, the substitution of a perfectly different fingering taking place as naturally as if it had been a simple passage instead of a very complicated one . . . in the course of the ensuing hour I received at least a dozen new ideas in nuancing, fingering, and bowing, the effect being as though the suggestions were given me through telepathy, or that my bow and fingers were being controlled by another Intelligence than my own.

Jelly d'Aranyi (1895–1966) — a friend of Sir Edward Elgar and brilliant concert violinist — discovered the whereabouts of Schumann's 'lost' violin concerto through séance activity (Palmstierna, 1937), but she received a great deal of help in her searches from her contacts in the music profession. (There is a scarcity of evidence as to how great a role medium-derived information played in this discovery outside of the source quoted.)

Although not necessarily claiming spiritual contact directly as the source of their inspiration, many well-known and respected composers have undergone psychic experiences which have brought them into contact with a 'divine' external source.

PROFESSIONAL COMPOSERS' EXPERIENCES

Professional composers have experienced feelings which might be described as paranormal. Sometimes these events might well have been explained as coincidences.

For instance, Schumann wrote of a funereal passage that haunted him and in due course a letter arrived from his sister-in-law stating that her brother had died (cited in Prince, 1963).

Saint-Saëns believed he possessed precognitive powers when he foresaw

future events concerning his own life (cited in Prince, 1963). Of more interest are composers' and performers' thoughts on the source of their inspiration.

In contrast to the musical mediums, several 'great' composers have reported their inspirations as having come directly from what they have called God:—

Straight away the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God...measure by measure, the finished product is revealed to me when I am in those rare, inspired moods.

[Brahms, cited in Klimo, 1987, p.314]

The music of this opera [Madame Butterfly] was dictated to me by God. I was merely instrumental in putting it on paper and communicating it to the public.

[Puccini, cited in Abel, 1955, p.117]

Concerning his 'Divine gift', it . . . "is a mandate from God" (Strauss, cited in Abel, 1955, p.100).

When God has not actually been named, then a suitable pseudonym has been used:-

...it is a supernatural influence which qualifies me to receive Divine truths.

[Puccini, cited in Abel, 1955, p.116]

I am convinced that there are universal currents of Divine Thought vibrating the ether everywhere and that anyone who can feel those vibrations is inspired, provided he is conscious of the process and possesses the knowledge and skill to present them in a convincing manner, be he composer, architect, painter, sculptor, or inventor.

[Humperdinck quoting Wagner, in Abel, 1955, p.137] er introduced the importance of craftsmanship

It is noticeable how Wagner introduced the importance of craftsmanship being necessary to convey the 'Divine Thought' to the physical world. Strauss and Brahms also stressed this: "a good composer must also be a good craftsman" (Strauss, cited in Abel, 1955, p.84).

... my compositions are not the fruits of inspiration alone, but also of severe, laborious and painstaking toil. [Brahms, cited in Abel, 1955, p.59]

On other occasions a 'semi-trance' has been spoken of. For instance, Wagner believed himself to be lying at the bottom of the Rhine, whereupon from his entranced imagination the opening music of *Das Rheingold* came to him (cited in Abel, 1955).

Perhaps the nearest states to entrancement are the hypnagogic and hypnopompic sleep states that dreams favour. Several composers have spoken of their musical experiences related to dreams:—

My most beautiful melodies have come to me in dreams.

[Bruch, cited in Abel, 1955, p.144]

I dreamed one night that I was composing a symphony and heard it in my dreams. On waking next morning I could recall nearly the whole of the movement...

[Berlioz, cited in Henson, 1977, pp.241-242]

Possibly the most famous story about a dream conveying a piece of music concerns the composition of the *Devil's Trill Sonata* by the famous eighteenth-century violinist/composer, Tartini. He was reputed in his dream to have made a Faustian pact with the Devil, who played the violin to him:—

How great was my astonishment when I heard him play with consummate skill a sonata of such exquisite beauty as surpassed the boldest flights of my imagination. I tried to retain the sounds I had heard. But it was in vain. The piece I then composed, however, *The Devil's Sonata*, was the best I ever wrote, but how far below the one I had heard in my dream.

[cited in Into the Unknown, 1971, p.224]

Some composers felt that a total loss of consciousness had a detrimental effect on the powers of inspiration. This was confirmed by Brahms (Abel, 1955, p.6), who, like Puccini, had to be alone and undisturbed when contacting the 'Power'.

Tchaikovsky spoke of a lack of control: "I forget everything and behave like a madman. Everything within me starts pulsating and quivering"; and Mahler put the matter most succinctly when he claimed "I don't choose what I compose: it chooses me" (cited in Klimo, 1987, p. 314). Rudolf Friml, the operetta composer, described himself as not composing but being used.

In some examples a visual element has allegedly been projected. Gershwin described how whilst riding on a train he suddenly heard and even "saw on paper the complete construction of the *Rhapsody [in Blue]* from beginning to end" (cited in Klimo, 1987, p. 314). The contemporary American composer Virgil Fox believes he saw the spirit of Liszt when he was trying to interpret one of his works, and received telepathic communication from him as to how the music was to be played (Klimo, 1987). There is certainly no shortage of interest in or claims of inspirational forces at work in contemporary musical thought.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

Composers and Performers

A group of eleven renowned composers/performers (ten British and one foreign) were contacted by letter in 1994 asking them about any views they might hold on the subject of music and the paranormal. They were chosen because it was hoped that they would be favourably disposed towards the subject either because of their previous writings or compositions or because of their radio/television interviews.

Their responses were varied:-

David Bedford replied personally
Stephen Dodgson replied personally
David Fanshaw wife replied, sending literature

Henryk Gorecki publishers replied, with reprimand for

not having contacted them

Jonathan Harvey replied personally
John Lill replied personally
John Paynter replied personally
Ian Parrott replied personally
John Tavener publishers replied
Sir Michael Tippett publishers replied
Julian Lloyd-Webber no reply

Of the composers who replied, only one, John Paynter, expressed amazement that he should be thought of as having an interest in or being influenced by paranormal matters. Sir Michael Tippett's publishers advised the reading of his autobiographical book, Those Twentieth-Century Blues, which contains a section on his dreams. This theme was also mentioned by David Bedford, who wrote of an interest in ESP and continued: "I often dream

of entire performances of my pieces, but after they have been composed, not before" (private letter to M. Willin, 1994). Jonathan Harvey spoke of relying on dreams or meditation for ideas, and wrote: "I meditate twice daily" (private communication to M. Willin, 1995); and, in some ways similarly, Stephen Dodgson wrote:—

I only know that for myself I have to stop applying logic actively whilst composing, and reserve it for the scrutiny and self-criticism that comes between times and afterwards. I actually believe in inspiration, and that I suppose is paranormality in action.

[private letter to M. Willin, 1994]

It is generally believed that John Tavener is Britain's leading spiritual composer and it was therefore disappointing only to receive literature from his publishers and not a direct communication. I therefore approached him directly at a conference on 'Music and the Psyche' in London on 24th February 1996. Our very brief conversation was as follows:—

- M.W. Excuse me, can I presume on you for a minute before your talk? You are a spiritual composer. Does it come from within you or is it from an external source?
- J.T. (Long pause). That's a difficult question. (Long pause). I think it comes from an external source, but works through me. I can't prove it, but I think that would be my answer.
- M.W. John Lill gave me a similar answer a few weeks ago.
- J.T. Oh, good. I think that's all I can say about it.

The concert pianist John Lill also featured in a letter received from Ian Parrott, who did not write of his own inspiration but stressed his absolute belief in Rosemary Brown (see Parrott, 1978) and mentioned John Lill's faith in her works. Contact has been fruitful with Lill on musical and spiritual matters, including an interview in February 1996, when he confirmed this belief. He is less convinced about other contemporary musical mediums' work (private conversation).

CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL MEDIUMS

During the 1970s several musical mediums published their works with varying degrees of success. One such was Clifford Enticknap, who believed that he was a channel for Handel's music. He believed that their relationship developed on Atlantis, where Handel was known as a great teacher called Arkos, and that prior to that he was on the planet Jupiter with some other great composers. Prior to this he was a female contemporary pupil of Handel's! He has written an oratorio—Beyond the Veil—which is four and a half hours in duration and contains such memorable lines as:—

He showed his genius at the keyboard, when not much more than a little child, and later he amazed the world by the very incredible speed with which he wrote his music.

[Out of this World, 1989]

The music consists of vaguely Handelian pastiche; thus for reasons which escape me Mr Enticknap would not appear to have performed the piece on subsequent occasions!

The musical mediumship of Rosemary Brown has caused controversy since the 1960s, when she started to publicize her music from spirit composers. It would seem from the available literature, which is substantial, that most people believe either that she was truly in contact with dead composers, or that she had hidden depths within her subconscious that allowed her to produce the hundreds of works that streamed from her pen during the 1960s and 1970s.

Ongoing research has included interviews with the concert pianist John Lill, who believes in the authenticity of her claims, as well as having her music analysed by present-day experts in Beethoven (Barry Cooper, University of Manchester) and Chopin (John Rink, University of London), who believe that her music is pastiche. Although some of the music has the hallmarks of the composers who allegedly dictated it (*Grubelei* by Liszt is one such example), most of the music heard lacked the 'vision' of the original composers when subjected to professional musical scrutiny.

(Mrs. Brown has not been willing to discuss or provide access to her music after the publication of her third book, *Look Beyond Today* (1986), where she spoke of a greater interest in poetry. In a final section of the book she provides details of the fairies that she has seen at the bottom of the garden, twenty-foottall angels, etc. For further reading see Brown, 1971; 1974; Parrott, 1978).

CASE STUDIES

A number of advertisements were placed in appropriate journals and magazines asking for people who believed that they were receiving music from discarnate sources to contact me. A questionnaire was devised (see Appendix) according to the guidelines set out in Wiseman & Morris (1995), but suitably modified to include musical aspects of mediumship.

During the period 1994–1996 sixteen questionnaires were sent out, of which thirteen were returned (see Appendix, Table 1, for a condensed response chart).

Because of space limitations, it is not possible here to expand on the issues that were researched. However there seemed to be equal numbers of male and female musical mediums—perhaps in contrast to general mediumship—and post-retirement ages were common. There was a wide range of musical ability and training, as well as psychic awareness prior to the onset of musical mediumship. Every case was researched in depth, to provide details of the mediums' lives as well as the authenticity of their music.

APPRAISAL

The majority of the musical mediums seemed to be absolutely genuine in their belief that dead composers/performers were attempting to bring new music into the world through their intermediary mediumship. Further to this, most did not seek financial gain from their efforts, although several sought public recognition for their gifts.

Some of the mediums went to lengths to minimize the extent of their musical training, but there were examples of childhood piano-lessons and large amounts of practice time in adulthood—sometimes several hours each day after retirement from full-time employment. It could be argued that at this time of life a gap in their emotional and physical lives was being alleviated by musical activity.

A feeling of personal importance may provide a clue to the claims of spirit

dictation, since an amateur musician writing a pleasant piece of music does not have the same impact on the public or on friends as the claim of divine intervention. Humility may have denied the mediums from naming God as their direct source and Spiritualism provided a convenient alternative. Furthermore, criticism of the music could be re-directed towards the spirit composer or the transmission problems encountered.

The music was mainly of a good amateur quality but it did not compare favourably with the music of the composers who were alleged to have dictated it. In their own defence, mediums stated that the transmission from the spirit world to the material world, as well as their own brains hampering the process, had a detrimental effect on the music. However, on some occasions the music or performance was felt to be exactly in accordance with the spirits' wishes and yet the results were still professionally below standard.

Whatever the genuineness of the musical mediums' beliefs, they have nevertheless achieved results which they could not normally have been expected to. They have been inspired by their beliefs to devote considerable amounts of time and energy to producing music and have received little in return for their efforts other than ridicule.

CONCLUSION

It would seem from past and present sources (e.g. various editions of the Groves Dictionary of Music) that musical mediums, despite the claims of the Spiritual establishment, have not achieved a high-enough standard of composition or performance to be acclaimed by professional musicians. (The exception is Rosemary Brown, who has received some support for her music.) To a large extent they bring about this comparison themselves by entering the 'domain' of the professional musicians, of whom very few have named a deceased composer as a source of direct dictation. Although there may be aspects of professional jealousy (snobbery) at any amateur's attempts to compete with a professional, one hopes that genuine ability would be acclaimed accordingly. If the mediums claimed to have been 'inspired by' the composers concerned instead of 'dictated to', then the musical establishment would probably accept their music more willingly.

It is possible at times to enter a trance-like state, for instance, while being totally involved emotionally with a piece of music, but in a fully alert, analytical state of mind a transcendental feeling is not achieved. This may be the clue to an understanding of the creative force at work in a medium.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Professor E. Clarke, Department of Music, University of Sheffield, Professor R. L. Morris, Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh and the Society for Psychical Research for their much appreciated support.

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APPENDIX

The Questionnaire shown on the next page occupied three sides of A4, with room for the answers (after the initial series of questions, where dots were provided) of about an inch and a quarter (30 mm). For reasons of space in the *Journal*, these gaps have been omitted. The questions were set in bold type and underlined.

Table 1, on page 57, summarizes the responses.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name
Address
Phone: (work)(home)
Sex
Date of birth
Occupation
Educational background
Musical background
Could you please describe what you regard to be your psychic ability?
What sorts of events initially led you to decide that you possessed this ability?
Could you please describe one or two instances in which your ability appeare especially striking or impressive?
What other possible explanations do you have for these events, i.e. what make you believe that they might be paranormal?
Have you noticed any special conditions that seem to affect your ability, e.g. whe it occurs, the psychological state that you are in, who else is around you, etc.?
Do you have a theory as to what might be going on?
What did you know about spiritual or psychic phenomena before these events?
Did you have an interest in music before these events?
Have you contacted any musicians before now and if so what was their reaction?
Have you read any books/articles about psychic phenomena? If so which ones? Have you read any books or articles about music? If so which ones?
Are you a member of any organisation connected with psychic phenomena? If s which ones?
Are you a member of any organisation connected with music? If so which ones?
Have you received any publicity or media attention regarding your musica psychical ability?
What are your hopes for the future concerning your musical/psychical ability?

Table 1

Contemporary Musical Mediums

REF No.	Gender	Year of Birth	Occupation	Education	Musical Education	Psychic Ability	Psychic Theory	Prior Psychic Awareness
1	F	No data	Housewife	Elementary	None	Clairvoyance & Clairaudience	Seership	YES
2	F	1939	Housewife	Secondary Modern	None	Mediumship	Higher Intelligence	YES
3	F	1938	No data	Grammar & Professional Courses	None	Clairvoyance & Clairaudience	Proof of no Death	NO NO
4	F	1937	Civil Servant	O' & 'A' Levels	Jr. Exhibitioner R.A.M. Victoria Coll. of Music	Musical Mediumship	Contact with Spirit of Novello	YES
5	F	1913	Music Teacher	Elementary	Musical Family	Clairaudience	None	NO
6	М	1931	Librarian	Grammar & Professional Courses	Self Taught	Clairaudience	Worlds within Worlds	NO
7	М	1942	No data	Private Education	Private Singing Lessons	Clairaudience	Contact with Spirit of Caruso	YES
8	М	1963	Artist	O' & 'A' Levels	Grade 6 Piano & Clarinet (Ass. Board)	Contact with Spiritual Field	Collective Unconsciousness	YES
9	М	1948	Multiple - incl. Musician	Secondary Modern	Self Taught	Clairvoyance & Clairaudience	Absolute Truth	YES
10	М	1960	Music Teacher	GCSE & 'A' Levels	2 Music Diplomas	Clairaudience	Binding to Chopin	NO
11	М	1957	Opera Singer & Medium	Grammar	Guildhall School of Music	Clairvoyance & Clairaudience	Reincarnation	YES
12	M	1937	Chartered Accountant	Prep. School & Profesional Courses	Trinity College of Music	Multiple as Medium	The Paranormal	YES
13	M	1930	Guesthouse Proprietor	College	College	Clairvoyance & Clairaudience	Contact with	No