

Music as an Opening to Religious Experience

Janet K. Ruffing

Fordham University, Bronx, New York, USA

Abstract

Based on qualitative research interviews, the author describes the ways in which Christian interviewees reported religious experience emerging in relationship to various forms of sound and music. Listening to liturgical music and popular songs as well internally heard music or sounds, chanting or singing as a practice are all considered in relationship to recent research on music and the brain, traditions of sacred sound, music and the emotions, and the healing properties of sound and music. The author concludes that the interviewees were largely unaware of the many ways they might use music as a meditation practice if they or their spiritual directors were more familiar with its potential uses based on current research. At the same time, the research clearly confirmed that music is one of the almost universal “triggers” of religious experience.

Introduction

Many cultures have traditions of sacred sound. Most religious traditions include the repetitive singing or chanting of mantras as a common meditative process. Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian Hesychasm, Hasidic chanting of Torah and the Psalms, Islamic Wazifas, Christian Gregorian chant, and contemporary Taize chant all manifest this use of sound as a way of fostering a meditative state. Music and dancing among the Sufis encourages such mystical consciousness. Rumi advises his disciples, “Don't worry about saving these Songs! And if one of our instruments breaks, it doesn't matter. We have fallen into the place where

everything is music." (1995:34) In the west, T.S.Eliot (1971) in the "Four Quartets" perceptively described such mystical consciousness mediated through music as well when he wrote, "You are the music while the music lasts" (44).

Across cultures, creation stories portray the world as originating from sound. For instance, in the Hebrew Scriptures, creation emerges from the uttered word of God (Gn. 1:3). Australian Aborigines map their entire world in memory through an intricate pattern of songlines which emerged from the dreaming. "For the Hindus, all was dark and quiet in the womb of the universe until the first movement, which created the sound, "OM." This cosmic vibration is so strong and so subtle that all things in the universe are dependent on it. ... In every cosmological myth sound and music are a major link between God and the people of the earth. (Campbell, 1989: 60-1) The use of sacred song or mantras is related to this primordial, originating character of voiced sound.

In twentieth century American culture as well as in many other urban centers in the world, sounds of every kind bombard us. Our technological society has sophisticated techniques for making every form of music available on CD's, Ipods, the internet, or radio every hour of the day and night. Our music, our sound rarely rises from silence; more often than not, we listen to music against a background of the humming and buzzing of every kind of imaginable motor inside and outside of our dwellings. According to Cathie Guzzetta (1991):

The atomic structure of our molecular system is also a resonant system. Nuclei vibrate, and the electrons in their orbit vibrate in resonance with their nucleus. Moreover, as long as the atom, cell, or organ contains an appropriate vibrational pattern, it can be 'played' by *outside* stimuli in harmony with its vibrational make-up. The phenomenon of sympathetic vibration depends on pitch. Thus, environmental sounds, such as those emitted from a dishwasher or television, may be capable of stimulating or producing sympathetic vibrations in the molecules and cells of our body

Mechanical rhythms and vibrations often contrast with the world of natural sounds that also impinge on our consciousness. Some of these sounds vibrate at speeds that are so contrary to our natural rhythms that they can make us ill (150).

At times when we are outside an urban environment which bathes us excessively in mechanical sound, we are more likely to notice a panoply

of bird songs and squawks, the sounds the wind makes at all different tempos moving through grasses or shaking tree branches or leaves, the sound of corn growing, water sounds as varied as the crashing surf, a running brook, or softly lapping water on a lakeshore, or the cacophony of a host of other animal sounds.

There is constant movement and sound in the natural non-fabricated world. When we actually notice this natural symphony playing all about, it often has a very soothing effect on us. Somehow, many of these life-world sounds return us to our own more natural rhythms. We easily become more relaxed and aware because these sounds in nature vibrate at frequencies and speeds closer to our natural physical rhythms. Guzzetta (1991) explains this response:

Our entire body vibrates at a fundamental inaudible frequency of approximately 8 cycles per second when it is in a relaxed state. During relaxed meditation, the frequency of brain waves produced is also about 8 cycles per second. Moreover, the earth vibrates at this same fundamental frequency of 8 cycles per second. This phenomenon is called Schumann's Resonance and is a function of electro-magnetic radiation and the earth's circumference. Thus there is a sympathetic resonance between the electrically charged layers of the earth's atmosphere and the human body. Therefore, 'being in harmony with oneself and the universe' may be more than a poetic concept (150-1).

The removal of the backdrop of mechanical sounds reduces our auditory overload sufficiently so that it becomes pleasurable and possible to distinguish among the discrete natural sounds that occur in our audible range. This change in auditory stimulus may be one reason why experiences in nature so often trigger religious experience.

The natural sounds of the created universe, the natural rhythms and vibrations of our physical body, and the shadings of tonal and melodic qualities of our voices provide the basic elements and vocabulary that music elaborates and develops. These fundamental life rhythms that we encode in music affect us physically and psychologically whether or not we consciously register it.

Recent neuroscientific and evolutionary studies establish that music predates language and that the archeological record shows "an uninterrupted record of music making everywhere we find humans, and in every era" (Levitin 1997:256). Singing most likely developed before

the use of percussion(rattles, drums, shakers) or wind instruments(didgeridoos, bone flutes, etc.) In addition, “in every society of which we’re aware, music and dance are inseparable” (Levitin 1997: 257).

The fact that music making is more than fifty thousand years old might account for the ubiquity of the use of music,dance, and song in religious practice. Daniel Levitin (1997) says, “The multiple reinforcing cues of a good song—rhythm, melody, contour—cause music to stick in our heads. That is the reason that many ancient myths, epics, and even the Old Testament were set to music in preparation for being passed down... As a tool for activation of specific thoughts, music is not as good as language. As a tool for arousing feelings and emotions, music is better than language. The combination of the two—as...exemplified in a love song—is the best...of all”(267).

Liturgical musician, Don Saliers (2006) asserts that “sacred texts are carried more deeply into the human body and the human psyche when they are chanted and sung than when they are only ‘read’ or spoken.” (54). He further reflects: Music is the language of the soul made audible, conferring upon human speech addressed to the divine its origin and mystery—particularly as music becomes a performative mode of a community’s life. ... [It] has the power to elicit deep emotions—both as ‘feeling states’ and as long-term emotional dispositions. Hence, music enters into the manner by which a community expresses and discovers joy and sorrow, praise and lament, grief and consolation. Ordered sound can thus confer a certain ‘sacrality’ on the whole of human life” (55). Saliers emphasizes the formative aspects of music as well as its expressiveness. He suggests that some music “carries sacrality because it takes words so deeply into us and our world that we and the world are changed: ‘We Shall Overcome,’ ‘Siyahamba’ (a South African anti-apartheid song) (56).

As a result of these and other characteristics, music in many forms continues to be a primary opening to and mediation of religious experience in both communal practice (worship and meditation) and in individual mystical experience. It is thus of great importance for spiritual directors to attend to and make use of music in spiritual direction.

In research interviews I conducted several years ago, I discovered that among this small sample of twenty four people who ranged in age from thirty-five to seventy, music was nearly as important as nature (Ruffing, 1997) in mediating or fostering religious experience. Among the participants in this study, twenty-one out of twenty-four singled out

music as having some importance to them in opening them to religious experience.

Summary of Interviewees Responses to Music

All of those interviewed were not equally articulate about how music affected them or even about how they used music to open themselves to God. Only a few participants had significant musical training, yet most of them were deeply affected by music in some way. The widespread availability of Ipods, tape decks, and CD Players provided the technological basis for fourteen participants to play recordings of instrumental music or of fully accompanied songs as an occasional or common way for them to pray.

Influence of Church Music

Probably even more significant was the acknowledgement of eleven respondents who sang in church choirs, sang Taize chants at Prayer around the Cross, or who were deeply affected by songs they heard or sang in church. Whether specifically acknowledged or not, all participants in this study had spent many years singing or listening to hymns, songs, chants, and organ music as a regular element in their liturgical worship. This repertoire of liturgical music of varying styles and degrees of musical quality and affective content is deeply embedded in their memories and sometimes triggered complex and profound religious responses.

For those who mentioned sacred or liturgical music specifically, a wide range of music was included. Most of this music combines words with melodies. Three were particularly attracted to Gregorian chant and played it in solitude or sought out choirs which performed it. One person mentioned the Easter songs and chants which were being performed about the same time of year as the interview. Others mentioned popular folk liturgical music while others reported responses to congregational style hymns.

Classical and Popular Music

Liturgical music, however, was not the only kind of music through which God seemed to touch these respondents. Popular songs, country music, and classical music were important to a smaller group. One woman regularly sang romantic or operatic vocal pieces as part of her prayer process.

For seven of the respondents, music they had previously heard or sung, with or without words, would arise into consciousness from meditative

states, triggered by something in the way God was present to them; three others heard original melodies or songs interiorly. Only one of these latter had sufficient musical training to write out the notation.

Imagery Evoked by Music

Five of the interviewees developed rich spontaneous internal imagery responses to music. Two of these had pursued some training in the recognized process of GIM, Guided Imagery with Music that has become popular in some forms of music therapy and in some retreats.

Playing an Instrument or Dancing

Five of the interviewees played some form of instrumental music without words as a way of entering into prayer experience. Only five respondents mentioned playing musical instruments, two piano, one the dulcimer and guitar, and two others guitar. Seven respondents reported dancing to music. Two of the women danced only kinesthetically in imagination. The rest danced to recorded music or to internal melodies and rhythms.

Music and Emotional Responses

Although there is a growing body of neurological studies on the effects of different kinds of music and sound, the way music emerged as an opening to God appeared to be haphazard in the interviews. Some of the research on how music affects different areas of the brain can help spiritual directors and prayers understand better the biophysical basis for some of the responses of those interviewed and guide suggestions for the use of music. Why a particular piece of music, however, suddenly became an intense experience of God's love or presence can not be explained by neurophysiology alone.

For instance, several people talked about songs triggering intense emotional responses. Often enough these were popular songs although some were liturgical ones. From the research, we do know that music affects the limbic area of the brain which is the seat of emotions, feelings, and sensations. Emotions and feelings can be triggered by music without the higher portions of the brain being conscious of these effects.

A couple of people in the study had developed complex emotional associations with particular songs in addition to the emotional content inherent in the music and words of the songs themselves. Thus music evoked religious feelings, and over time, songs became suffused with interpersonal relational content.

Let me give several examples of the complex interrelationship between music, feelings, and religious experience among the interviewees. One of the men described being moved to tears when he heard certain songs in church. He named the Gregorian chant, *Pange Lingua* and a St. Louis Jesuit Song, "The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor." He would have heard the chant during Holy Week services for many, many years. Both songs were experienced in liturgical Eucharistic contexts. He talked about, "feeling it inside" when the congregation or choir sang. "It's difficult to say, but I can feel his goodness, that's a word, you know, and it's intangible. I mean I just know it. That's all. I mean it's the best way for me to describe it. It's more intense than." [EC3. M.M] This sense of feeling inside what the words and music are about particularly occurred when he had a heightened sense of God's presence. The melody or words from these songs could come into awareness while he was walking down the street, but only if he was already sensing God's presence. Hence, the songs evoked these feelings on certain occasions, or an experience of God evoked the melodies. This man, however, never played the songs in an effort to trigger a similar experience. He was convinced he could not make it happen. For him, the experience was spontaneous and uncontrolled. "I've tried, you know. I've said, what am I?... Is this for real? or is it me? or is it...? Or is it my mind?and I try sometimes to have these feelings... It doesn't work."

Another woman described how she chose music to begin her prayer in relationship to something she was feeling and sensing in herself. "I'll put on a tape or something. If a piece of music really strikes me and speaks to me, I'll play it. Sometimes it's not even just the music itself that seems to connect with me. I don't know why some pieces do and some pieces don't. Sometimes just hearing the melody, I like that piece of music, and it says something to me, or it lifts me, or it touches me, and I don't even know what but it touches a place in me that makes me want to hear it." [EC4]

When she was praying with a piece of music, she continued to play it until she either was finished with those feelings or understood how the music was expressing something in herself or her relationship with God. Like the man above, certain songs triggered particularly strong responses. The songs she identified were popular songs that happened to be playing on the radio when her mother was dying or when she had just left an intimate time of prayer. In both instances, she felt as if these songs were expressing how God was with her.

One of my papers that I did at school a couple of summers ago was on my mother. One of the songs very popular at the time that

reflected my experience was “Wind Beneath My Wings.” So when I hear that, you know, it reminds me of her. And it reminds me a lot of myself because it’s my experience, too—God being the wind beneath my wings, too.

I’ll give you another example. I was also at summer school. My prayer was kind of a loving conversation that was going on between myself and Jesus. After I ended my prayer, I went back into my room and I put on the radio. And the first thing I heard was “You Are So Beautiful to Me.” I really felt this was God’s reply to me. It was just that refrain, and it kept repeating itself.[EC4. F. REI.]

In both of these examples the words and the music of the songs help the respondents experience and connect with a deep level of complex feeling. Sometimes they are not even aware of the particular feelings they have, and the music opens them to greater awareness. At other times, music becomes associated with important experiences and when it is heard subsequently triggers memories as well as present feelings.

Several of the interviewees used music in order to access different levels of consciousness than they could reach through simple introspection or rational reflection. The music surfaced imagery, kinesthetic responses, and not yet completely conscious feelings. This was particularly true of the respondents who had experienced guided imagery deliberately evoked through music. One sister, when she found she was totally blocked in her prayer after several years of imaged prayer or conversation recalled this experience:

I remember I was sitting there speechless and needing something to express what was going on inside. I had gone to the chapel. And I said I’ll just put some music on and sit here. I guess it was because I was tired of groping for words or trying to find some way of expressing what was going on inside—the anxiety, the darkness or whatever. The music just took me. I went beyond the words [of the song]. At that time there were whole periods of darkness and confusion and anger. And my body carried all of that. Through my movement I began to cry out to Jesus. “Get me out of this darkness—break through this!” And that’s how all this happened... I have so much inside to pray with and pray about—this is my own way. This is my own journey and with my God, I can cry out in my words rather than in someone else’s words. [WC12. F. Rel. 3]

She then described how her sense of God changed when she became free to express herself in movement as well as in words. “It was more of a real

God the Lord of the Dance it was both of us co creating, doing and becoming rather than me giving this to God, talking to God out of the stillness. There is a mutuality a whole source of energy back and forth.” [WC12]

Another woman reported multiple ways music evoked deep spiritual experience in her. She frequently sculpted clay figures of her images. She had begun her prayer that morning by playing John Michael Talbot's *Magnificat*. “It's very hard to describe. That song is very powerful for me. I played it that morning and I wrote the words out and then I talked about this. The image came before I made it—a circle but there's no beginning and no end and it's open. The circle became spirit and water and dance and so many things. All that came in prayer and I just picked up the clay and this is what came.” [EC8. F. M.] Music was consistently important to her: “I love music and I've always sung with choirs. Even when I'm singing the music, even with the choir, very often, a lot is going on in prayer and I'm being lifted up and I'm in another place. I think [this has been] all of my life. As a child I was involved with choirs. As a child whenever the class was brought to church, whatever we sang, I was carried away by music.” [EC8. F. M.] As a result of this immersion in music and her responsiveness to it, music or songs would appear in her consciousness during the day outside of formal prayer time. “I can be in the house. I can be at the ironing board and singing inside myself or out loud. But music is very often just with me throughout the day and words or songs will come that really I need to hear at that time.” [EC8]

Another married woman sang in her home as a regular part of a three to four hour contemplative process each day. After having reflected on her present experience she thought about why this person or event was attracting her attention. She then wrote several pages of her thoughts about it in her journal. Then, she turned to music.

And when I'm finished with that, I feel very dry, you know, too much in my mind. Then I just gravitate toward the piano, where I play and sing. I'm not troubled by technical details. It's easy to touch God that way too, because it's just like opening a door into some treasured garden. I can sing about things. I do collage there as well. If I'm worried about an international incident or something, or I'm worried about my next-door neighbor, I'll sing a song of longing. You can pick the song you want—a longing kind of prayer. But if I'm feeling kind of tickled with myself, a miracle, I'll pick that kind of song, and it seems to work really well for me. [I choose] songs that are good for my voice. I have an operatic

type voice. So the classical operatic song...most of them have a religious fit. I have some that are romantic songs. Some days I feel like I'm with God when I'm singing the romantic songs, but basically the strong fit is toward the more traditional songs. Then I have one little book that comes from a more... I think it's a more evangelical type, and I like that one, because it has some songs that the traditional one doesn't. The traditional one does real well with longing and sadness and stuff, but I find if the mood is victorious, peppy, etc, this little book has more of that. [WC4. F. M]

Singing from the operatic repertoire brought her into her feelings after her vigorous mental reflection. These musically voiced feelings usually brought her into God's presence as she was singing. She often had intense visionary experience. When that was the case, the singing seemed to help her release her feelings and accept the mystical experiences which she did not directly seek and sometimes troubled her.

Healing Properties of Music and Sound

Among those who are particularly interested in the healing properties of music and sound, this connection between sound and emotion is very significant. As these study participants reported, songs which were laden with emotional content through their personal associations to these songs helped them identify and contact a range of feelings and relate their emotional life to God.

However, the work recently being done therapeutically with sound in the form of "toning" or voiced sounds encourages participants to sound various syllables for as often as ten to twenty minutes. This sounding which is not singing or patterned in the complex fashion of music frequently results in a deep emotional release of feelings stored in the physical body. Kay Gardner asserts, "If you can duplicate the sound of that [emotional] pain, you can sound it and allow that pain to release; then you can send a healing sound to it. It's a very good way of balancing. You can work with a lot of physical and emotional dis-ease that way" (Barratt, 1991:44).

The prolonged chanting in Tibetan Buddhist and Indian Hindu practice uses this bodily form as a way of opening to altered states of consciousness. The intention of chanting is, in this context, sacred. The prolonged voicing of these sounds releases emotional content without focusing on it by providing an avenue of release. Consciousness is then directed toward the transcendent. The experienced quality of silence at the end of a period of chanting is profound. In the process, the vibrational qualities

of the entire human organism have been altered. Robert Gass (1999: 48) identifies chant's five elemental powers as: anchoring (emotional release), entrainment (body and psyche join the rhythm and mood), breathing (changes mind/body function), sonic effects (tonal and vibrational characteristics), and intention (desires and will).

In western forms of sacred music with the exception of Gregorian chant or recently composed mantra types of chant, the power of this process of making vocal sounds rather than merely listening to the vocal sounds others make, is only available in a rather limited way to those who sing in choirs or perform vocally in some context. Rarely, is our music sung long enough to produce the changes in consciousness that tonal chanting does. Further the strong metrical forms do not vibrate the body in ways that are harmonious with the natural rhythm cycles of the human body.

Music and the Brain

This tonal chanting profoundly affects the limbic area of the brain, the so-called mid-brain, which regulates the tone or emotion of the body. Language is not yet formulated in this part of the old brain, but basic sounds of emotional expression and communication are: cries of pain, joy, soothing hums, sighs, hissing, etc. This is the part of the brain that has to do with emotional bonding, nurturing instincts, social connection. This area of the brain is also timeless. Making sounds alone or in a group connect us both with ourselves and with others. In this pre-verbal, timeless sense of connection, it is not uncommon for persons who experience mystical rapture to utter such sounds spontaneously—deep sighs, laughter, jubilation (an ecstatic utterance of praise or adoration reported by women mystics). This part of the brain is the gatekeeper between the conscious and subconscious and is understood intuitively. In charismatic prayer groups, glossolalia (speaking in tongues) when it is not an actual language issues from this part of the brain.

Western technological cultures tend to restrict such expression in our ordinary process of socialization. We encourage our children and ourselves not to make these primal kinds of sounds. We foster a more internalized consciousness of interior talking to ourselves about our experience. It frequently does not feel safe to express such basic emotional responses in groans and sighs.

Music also affects the more ancient hind brain, and the higher areas of the brain (left, right, and pre-frontal lobes). Music is so powerful a mediation of religious experience because it can affect every part of the brain as a medium for religious experience.

The power of music beyond voiced tones is related to the basic rhythms of the body. Rhythms which can be duplicated musically include the heartbeat, the breathing cycle, and brain wave cycles. These are pulses which occur within minutes or seconds and can be shown as beats on a metronome. These rhythms get further elaborated in the whole body in walking, running, dance, etc. When we are hearing music alone or in a group, our internal rhythms spontaneously entrain themselves to the beat of the music. When this is experienced in a group, especially when the group is moving together in ritual dance, a profound sense of community can develop.

Some music today is being composed specifically to induce states of relaxation and healing by pacing itself to the slower cycles of delta rhythms (sleep states and a deep meditative state for some) Theta rhythms (paraconsciousness) and Alpha rhythms (a meditative waking state). These brain rhythms evoke states of deep relaxation but do not necessarily improve mental functioning for complex tasks which move at the much faster rate of beta rhythms. (Weil et al and Cook and Thompson)

Dr. Alfred Tomatis discovered that some kinds of chanting and music functioned much like food—this kind of chanting energized or charged the body and stimulated not only the mid-brain and the hind brain but when combined to words such as in Gregorian Chant. He found a similar response to complex musical compositions that stimulated the cortex of the brain. He worked with several monastic communities who traditionally chanted six hours a day. When they stopped the practice of chanting and recited the offices, most of the members became ill and listless. He found that the brain needed about four and one half hours a day of stimuli to stay awake and alert. Some music provided this kind of stimulation and charging; other sounds exhausted the body and drained it.

Dr. Tomatis realized that to pray, to reach a meditative state, required strong cortical stimuli in order to hold focus and overcome the inflow of distracting thoughts, feelings, ideas, and impulses. He discovered that the monks could maintain their rigorous schedule with reduced amounts of sleep and protein because the chanting provided them with the nourishment through sound they needed for the contemplative work of prayer, silence, and physical labor (Wilson, 1991:14).

The left and right sides of the higher brain process language, engage in linear thought, appreciate myth, story, and art forms while the prefrontal lobe recognizes full patterns, processes, and procedures. This may be the conscious, prayer part of the brain according to Don Campbell. It

coordinates complex processes and is the seat of spiritual perception. (1989, 51) A fully developed religious practice involves all sections of the brain.

Music is, of course, more complex than rhythm and melody. It offers as do other art forms an ordered experience, in this case a temporal sequence that unfolds like our lives themselves do, but infused with great beauty that touches us non-verbally in our depths. This is very similar to some mystical experiences themselves that register a depth and intensity without any words. Instrumental music particularly invites experience that we might not arrive at without it. In discussing music and ecstasy, Robert Jordain(1997) states:

Many people say that it is beauty alone that draws them to music. But great music brings us even more. By providing the brain with an artificial environment, and forcing it through that environment in controlled ways, music imparts the means of experiencing relations far deeper than we encounter in our everyday lives. When music is written with genius, every event is carefully selected to build the substructure for exceptionally deep relations. . . .In this perfect world, our brains are able to piece together larger understandings than they can in the workaday. . . world, perceiving all-encompassing relations that go much deeper than those we find in ordinary experience. Thus, however briefly, we attain a greater grasp of the world. . . as if rising from the ground to look down upon the confining maze of ordinary existence.

It is for this reason that music can be transcendent. For a few moments it makes us larger than we really are, and the world more orderly than it really is. We respond not just to the beauty of the sustained deep relations that are revealed, but also to the fact of our perceiving them. . . . [We] feel our very existence expand and realize that we can be more than we normally are, and the world is more than it seems. That is cause enough for ecstasy." (331)

Conclusion

As I listened to the men and women I interviewed, it seemed to me that several of them could have developed this opening to the sacred at even greater depths if they had had more knowledge about how music or sound directly affects states of consciousness. It was as if each one discovered music as an opening to religious experience from scratch. Spiritual directors who have some knowledge of music could help their directees use music

more consciously and more effectively in their spiritual practice. If the interviewees or their spiritual directors had been more familiar with how their brains function and how different kinds of music and sound affect different areas of our brain/ bodies, they could make more conscious choices about how to incorporate music into their practices of intention and attention in order to support their contemplative lives. Spiritual directors can support their directees's use of music when they take the time to explore how music is already functioning as a mediation of religious experience for their directees, and on the basis of that understanding make appropriate suggestions for continuing a practice or experimenting with other ways of using music.

For instance, those who were in intense therapy could have used "toning" to non-verbally express and release emotion or physical pain before beginning to meditate. Others might have used tonal chanting to more effect by sounding with a piece of recorded music or feeling free to sing alone as a way of opening themselves to God and of releasing unconsciously stored emotion without focusing on it directly. Some might have discovered a particular chant with words that expressed their own religious feeling. They might learn to use it continuously for more than twenty minutes so that the repetition of the words and melody together would penetrate deeper levels of the psyche and allow their prayer to simplify and deepen instead of continuing on to the next track on the CD. Others might have recognized why listening to Gregorian Chant or classical music might lead them into contemplative prayer experiences. Still others could have used contemporary music to either energize or rest their bodies so that they could hold the attentive focus required for prayer. Finally, as their contemplative experience deepened and simplified, some might have found ways to use music or sound as a way to remain in that simple state of attentiveness to God with minimal emotional or cognitive content. Music can, just like nature and beauty, be a doorway into contemplation.

Nevertheless, despite lack of knowledge about the growing body of scientific and spiritual understandings of the uses and effects of music on the human organism, these interviewees were aware that music, often sacred music, was an important opening to religious experience for them in a variety of ways.

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Author's Note: Details of the Research Methodology

The Sample: Practicing spiritual directors received a description of the characteristics needed in potential interviewees. Directors submitted names of directees willing to participate in the study who they determined fit the profile. All interviewees were in spiritual direction in a Christian context. The sample of two dozen men and women were selected using random tables half from the west and east coasts from a pool of more than 200.

The Participants: The interviewees were between thirty-five and seventy years of age. The majority were Roman Catholics, although several had converted from Protestant churches and several were Episcopalians. All had been committed to prayer for at least five years, and their prayer was primarily kataphatic in style. Each participant was identified geographically, E/W (coast), by gender M/F, marital status, or as religious or clergy. A number was assigned on the basis of the order in which the interviews took place.

The Research Method: Interviews covered a series of topics and were conducted in a fluid way that allowed for probing for more detail. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and using a qualitative method, the researcher looked for themes and patterns across the interviews.