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Musical composition and mystical spirituality¹

Brian Inglis

Introduction: Music and Mysticism

Mystical and visionary states have often been associated with sound and music, from the thoroughly multimedia visions of St Hildegard of Bingen (which reportedly gave rise to her chant compositions) to Margery Kempe's auditory visions of heavenly melodies and sweet birdsong. I myself had an auditory vision as a young child, of which a kind of white noise was one of the prominent memorable aspects.² For me this was a unique experience, but as a composer and scholar I am drawn to those who have had visionary experiences consistently, and written them down systematically. Between 1991 and 2015 I completed 16 works setting mystical poetry, mainly by Hildegard but also including Catherine of Siena and, from different culturo-religious perspectives, the Corpus Hermeticum, the Sufi poet Rumi and the Orthodox writer St Symeon the New Theologian. In addition, several of my instrumental pieces explore spiritual concepts through symbolic objects and/or analagous processes. In this chapter I will introduce selected compositions by myself and other composers of different eras (Hildegard, Couperin, Arvo Pärt and Peter Maxwell Davies), linking and contextualising them via theoretical texts dealing more widely with notions of mysticism, spiritual ecstasy, and its musical encoding. Drawing on literature from both musical and religious studies, I offer some examples of how aspects of mystical spirituality and musical composition and reception might be understood to interact.

Definitions: Mystical spirituality – and compositional processes

First, a framework of definitions. For the over-arching term spirituality, we can adopt from William James the denotation of a sense of reality beyond or other than that given by the senses with which we customarily perceive the phenomenal world. Continuing with James's thought: he attributes to *mystical* spiritual states four qualities:

- Ineffability (direct felt experience)
- Noetic quality (illuminative/revelatory insight)
- Transience (a duration limited typically to thirty minutes, or exceptionally to an hour or two)

¹ An initial version of this paper, with the title *Music, Mysticism and Ecstasy*, was delivered at the inaugural Music and Spirituality Study Day of the Tavener Centre for Music and Spirituality hosted by the University of Winchester on 11 November 2016.

² In a retrospective account of the experience written at the age of 17, I wrote: 'I was alone. I was at the top of the stairs. For some reason, I must have fallen downstairs; at any rate a moment later I found myself sitting frightened, face down at the bottom of the stairs. My memory of this is somewhat hazy, but I remember I was rather stunned at the time, and yet surrounded by a strange noise. I heard my name being called. After that I only remember the voice; booming, powerful, assuring, guiding. I do not remember the words that were spoken; possibly I did not understand the words at the time. It was a deeply memorable experience, and made a profound impression upon me. The booming voice went on, then gently stopped; all that was left was a sound like that of a fire crackling, then a hissing, which I eventually realized was the sound of the air.'

- Passivity (the retreat of the will and entry of another energy)³

Blackwell divides mysticism more basically into two aspects: an outward (which he associates with the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam) and an inward (which he links to Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism). The outward aspect is defined as experience of ‘transcendent reality infinitely greater than oneself’ (transcendence itself is further sub-defined: see below). Inward mysticism, in contrast, is characterised by a ‘supernal state of mind’. Quoting Robert Ginello, he expands on these definitions, explaining that in the case of outward mysticism: ‘Such an encounter is usually said to be gratuitous, in the sense that those subject to it are not themselves responsible for its occurrence, and it is typically described as both overwhelming and self-authenticating’. (The ‘gratuitousness’ of this definition aligns it with James’s identification of the mystic as a passive vessel in his fourth point above.) With inward mysticism: ‘Such an attainment is usually held ... to be the result of the subject’s own efforts in following a certain contemplative discipline or method’.⁴

Musical composition – particularly the generation of musical ideas – has often been viewed through a quasi-mystical lens. As observed by Jonathan Harvey: ‘The element of mystery – a sense that something miraculous, beyond rational explanation, is taking place – is a crucial component of the experience of inspiration for most composers.’⁵ Musical (and other) creativity in the West was generally understood as the perquisite of the divine until the 18th century, with the composer either limited to artisan craft or, at most, a passive recipient of the thunderbolt of ‘inspiration’. This links the compositional act to the passive and noetic qualities identified by James, and the gratuitousness of Ginello’s outward mysticism. A twentieth century incarnation of this view is preserved in Stravinsky’s famous comment that ‘I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed’, which Harvey compares to a force ‘overwhelming the innocent composer’⁶ A clear echo, then, of Ginello’s description of outward mysticism; another is found in Harvey’s reference to composers’ descriptions of ‘an experience that takes them over, of which they are almost passive observers’.⁷ While many contemporary composers will admit a role for inspiration (the spontaneous occurrence of ideas), since Beethoven a more process-based approach to compositional practice has been normative, whether in (to take a common example) taking walks to facilitate or stimulate the aural imagination; actively working at material through the trial-and-error methods of improvisation and sketching; or almost bypassing personality through algorithmic compositional techniques. When such deliberate processes are felt to be particularly successful, they may equate to the ‘supernal state of mind’ which Blackwell associates with inward mysticism. In a more quotidian context, certain algorithmic compositional techniques – as we will see later – can be employed to symbolise mystical or other spiritual contexts. Of course the outward and inward phenomena are by no means mutually exclusive, or even necessarily as distinct and oppositional as presented by Blackwell and Ginello. Stravinsky’s above comment, for instance (whose rhetorical value needs to be borne in mind) hides his very active engagement with source material identifiably lifted from Russian folk repertoire – as attested by the published sketches – as much as any medieval writer’s modesty topos. And certain pre-compositional practices, whether going for a walk or devising an algorithm, may

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans Green, 1902), 380-382.

⁴ Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1999), 202-3.

⁵ Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 3.

⁶ Harvey, *Music and Inspiration*, 5-6.

⁷ Harvey, *Music and Inspiration*, 5.

actually *engender* the inspiration sought – the inward practice facilitating the outward revelation.

Conversely, composers' responses to their occasional *lack* of inspiration is characterised by Harvey with a mystical analogy:

The feelings caused by conviction that sterility has descended are profound: they may be compared to the belief reported by some religious mystics that they have been abandoned by God and hence deprived of all spiritual refreshment. St Theresa of Avila wrote of one such experience [...]. If the composer's idea of inspiration can be related to a religious model, then so too can the opposite: the feeling of sterility and abandonment is experienced by the composer as painfully as by the mystic.⁸

Ecstasy and Trance

Returning to Blackwell: linked with his identification of mystical experiences as outward or inward are the two essential types of mystical state, Ecstasy and Trance. Paraphrasing Rouget, trance is defined as 'a state of transport into or possession by the transcendent that involves personal dissociation, loss of a sense of self'.⁹ This is a state which, as inward mysticism, may be actively sought and achieved by voluntary processes, including those involving (usually repetitive) movement and sound. Ecstasy, on the other hand, is direct experience of the beyond, union with the divine, or as Lewis dramatically puts it, 'seizure ... by divinity'.¹⁰ In its involuntary nature this phenomenon may be linked with Blackwell's (Ginello's) definition of outward mysticism; he goes on to describe ecstasy as 'a sense of personal communion with or filling by the transcendent ... [a] loss of self ... through a sense of personal enlargement or completion'.¹¹

Transcendence itself is identified by Blackwell as having four different varieties:

- *negative*: that which is hidden within the 'cloud of unknowing' or 'holy void'; the numinous;
- *radical*: i.e. (drawing on Frank Brown) 'infinite yet communicative';
- *proximate*: i.e. 'transcendence disclosed through human experiences of God's presence and grace';
- *immanent*: a kind of pantheism where the world and its quotidian nature are themselves sacralised.¹²

Having explored a framework of definitions, together with some analogies in the practice of musical composition, let us now consider ways in which compositions encode and evoke spiritual states.

⁸ Harvey, *Music and Inspiration*, 11-12.

⁹ Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 206.

¹⁰ I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 18.

¹¹ Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 206.

¹² Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 204-5.

Musical encoding of spiritual ecstasy: glossolalia

When music is wordless, it lacks denotative meaning, therefore can be interpreted in many different ways, offering listeners the potential to access transcendent realms of experience. This quality has led composers to jettison semantic text when searching to go beyond everyday phenomenal perception. (Instrumental music is of course also wordless, but lacks the specific subjective and empathic quality of the human voice.) Michael Tippett, whose understanding of ecstasy is explicitly congruent with Blackwell's and implicitly with Lewis's writes of:

the tradition, common throughout the early Christian centuries and going back into the pagan past, that ecstasy, that is the apprehension of the transcendent, is too huge to be expressed by words. It can only be expressed by vocalizations, shouts, orgiastic repetitions of vowels. The Greek word for this manifestation was glossolalia. And glossolalia is the central technique, if I may use that word, which the angels use in their music.¹³

In Christian liturgical music this tradition stretches back to the use of extended melismatic phrases in plainsong and early polyphony – understood to encourage hyperventilation and so keep singers awake and alert during liturgies starting in the middle of the night. (The hyperventilation itself may induce heightened states of inward mysticism in the singers, who in a monastic setting are coterminous with the listeners). As explained by Tippett, ‘glossolalia – the expression of ecstasy through vowel sounds ... came almost to be standardised in the Alleluia¹⁴ – a word whose denotative meaning has been overwhelmed by the potential of its open vowel sounds for extension into long melismas. Extreme melismas – also known as vocalise – are found in some chants by Hildegard of Bingen. A good example is the appropriately-titled responsory, *De Angelis (O vos angeli)*. The use of the technique in this piece – reportedly received, like all Hildegard's music, in a mystical vision¹⁵ – seems to concur with Tippett's speculative understanding of the ‘music of the angels’. For instance: in the repeated refrain which precedes and follows the verse section, the first syllable of ‘aspicitis’ (‘behold’), is set to a volley of no less than 76 notes in a spectacular display of ecstatic vocalise (example 1¹⁶):

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1}

Example 1: setting of ‘aspicitis’ from Hildegard of Bingen, *O vos angeli*.

Another notable feature, evident in this example, is the piece's range – at two-and-a-half octaves, greatly extended for medieval music (which even by the twelfth century typically retains the ambitus of an octave). As Honey Maconi points out, this was the entire gamut

¹³ Michael Tippett, *Music of the Angels* (London: Eulenberg, 1980), 62-3.

¹⁴ Tippett, *Music of the Angels*, 66.

¹⁵ As recounted in Hildegard's (auto)biographical Vita, ‘[after a visionary experience] I also brought forth songs with their melody, in praise of God and the saints, without being taught by anyone, and I sang them too, even though I had never learnt either musical notation or any kind of singing’. Quoted in Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the middle ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 145.

¹⁶ Transcribed from square notation printed on four-line staves in Barbara Stühlmeyer, trans. and introduced, *Lieder – Symphoniae*, Hildegard von Bingen Werke Band IV (Rüdesheim-Eibingen: Abtei St Hildegard/Beuroner Kunstverlag, 2012), 79. Quilismas are rendered as mordents.

available in medieval music theory and notation.¹⁷ Even within the collection from which the piece comes, Hildegard’s *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, it is extreme in this – and other – respects). In fact, the entire ambitus is encompassed within the setting of this one word ‘aspicitis’ (the mini-melisma on ‘ci’ includes the lowest note, while the vocalise on ‘a’ ascends to the highest). The metaphor seems, again, to be going beyond usual limits in a gesture of *radical* transcendence: exceeding the typical medieval ambitus suggests an approach to the infinite; yet containment within the modal system – and the presence of semantic text – retains the communicativity of musical and verbal syntax.¹⁸ The use of the highest register (line 2 in example 1) clearly connotes the heavenly realms – arranged in medieval cosmology as a strict hierarchy of differentiated heavens. Likewise were angels divided into nine ranks, as identified by Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁹

A different ‘standardised’ version of the traditions of glossolalia referred to by Tippett is employed in François Couperin’s *Leçons de Ténèbres*, written to be sung at public services leading up to Good Friday in 18th-century French convents. Each verse of the text – from the Lamentations of Jeremiah – is preceded by a vocalise on the Hebrew letter with which the original text begins. The first vocalise of each of three movements or ‘lessons’ uses the traditional plainsong for that part of the Latin version of the text. Example 2 is a setting for two voices and basso continuo of the initial letter ‘Jod’ from the third lesson, for Maundy Thursday matins (though in practice sung the previous evening).

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 2}

Example 2: setting of ‘Jod’ from Couperin, *Leçons de Ténèbres* (third lesson).

In the recording by Alfred Deller and Philip Dodd,²⁰ Deller’s voice has the ‘grained’ quality of what Roland Barthes describes as ‘genosong’; that is: ‘it forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex [...] Where the melody really works at the voluptuousness of [the language’s] sound-signifiers, of its letters’²¹ – facilitated in this case by the standardised glossolalia used as a compositional device. The means of production of Deller’s countertenor voice also takes us further than usual from embodiment and towards a sonic space which facilitates spiritual ‘jouissance’, as with Tippett’s orgiastic repetitions. The potential for transcendence through listening to this recording is perhaps of the *proximate* kind, if we consider genosong’s negation of denotative communication. However, contemplating the extra-musical performance practice of the original context opens another window of spiritual opportunity. In the candlelit historic convent performances, one candle was extinguished after each Hebrew letter vocalise, allowing for the possibility of *negative* transcendence via perception of the encroaching void of darkness.

¹⁷ Honey Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 95-6. She points out this extraordinary range is also found in the anonymous south German plainchant *Alleluia Ora voce pia pro nobis*.

¹⁸ The whole text of the refrain reads: Sit laus vobis, qui loculum antique cordis in fonte aspicitis (Praise be to you, / who behold in the fountain / the little place of the ancient heart. Text and translation from Barbara Newman, *Saint Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1988), 156-7.

¹⁹ Colm Luibheid, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press), ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’ (chapters 6-9).

²⁰ Harmonia Mundi Musique D’abord 195210 (2001 re-release; originally recorded 1970).

²¹ Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath, ‘The Grain of the Voice’ in *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 182

From my own oeuvre, *Prelude and Alleluia* (1996)²² draws on the related traditions of standardised glossolalia drawn on by medieval Alleluia settings and by Couperin. The Alleluia second movement takes as its text Hildegard's poem *O virga mediatrix*. Liturgically, this is a text for the Gospel Acclamation, traditionally given a melismatic setting in plainsong. My initial setting of the Alleluia (see example 3) exhibits an expanding vocalise style (using an additive process²³) specifically inspired by the ecstatic expanding and contracting vocalises of Couperin's *Leçons de Ténèbres*.

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3}

Example 3: Brian Inglis, 'Alleluia' from *Prelude and Alleluia* (opening vocalise; harp part omitted).

The two-octave range of the passage also echoes Hildegard's exploitation of range and tessitura in *O vos angeli*, seeking a similar sense of radical transcendence (although the communicative lexicon here encompasses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale rather than Hildegard's modal system or Couperin's diatonic tonality).

In the final section of the movement's three-part form, the Alleluia returns, presaging a ritualistic coda whose expanding repetitions evoke a more trance-like or inward form of mysticism. My aim here is not so much to generate a mystical state in listeners, nor to merely portray states of ecstasy or trance, but to convey them.

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4}

Example 4: Inglis, 'Alleluia' from *Prelude and Alleluia* (ending).

In 2015 I returned to this poem: seeking a text with both Latin and English elements for a Christmas carol-anthem commissioned by Bedford School, *A Christmas Alleluia*, I turned to Barbara Newman's edition, which parallels Hildegard's medieval Latin with freely poetic (as well as literal) English translations. As well as, again, the use of vocalise, now in a choral context, for the Alleluia passages, the ending of this setting (example 5) features mystical repetitions of a sort I had first explored in my oratorio *Visions of Sorrow and Joy* (1998).

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 5}

Example 5: Inglis, *A Christmas Alleluia*, first page of last section.

Such repetitions embody elements of both ecstasy and trance, if one takes Tippett's ecstatic 'orgiastic repetitions of vowels' alongside Rouget's process-based identification of trance states. As with the discussion of compositional and pre-compositional practice above, theological definitions presented as binary oppositions dissolve in the actuality of artistic practice. In the context of the oratorio, the division at the end into many vocal parts represents the nine ranks of angels, lauded in a text from Hildegard's *Scivias*, singing their eternal hallelujas in the vivid wheel of whirling circles envisioned by Hildegard.²⁴

²² *Prelude and Alleluia* – like the other works of mine referred to subsequently – is published by and available from Composers Edition (<https://composersedition.com/composers/brianinglis>).

²³ An initial 5-note group (starting in the fourth bar of Example 2) is repeated with the addition of three notes to make 8; then the 8 notes are repeated with the addition of 5 to make 13; a further 8 are then added to make 21. The proportions, as will be apparent, follow the Fibonacci sequence.

²⁴ Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990) Book 3 vision 13 'Symphony of the Blessed'.

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 6}

Example 6: Inglis, *Visions of Sorrow and Joy*, first page of final Hallelujah.

From the musical encoding of specific, essentially positive inward and outward mystical states (trance and ecstasy), let us turn now to the signification of spiritual lamenting through a musico-semiotic lens.²⁵

Musical objects: *Stabat Mater* (Pärt) and *The Song of Margery Kempe* (Inglis)

Arvo Pärt's *Stabat Mater* (1985) for three voices and string trio, provides an aural emblem of that traditional religious trope in visual art, the *pietà*.²⁶ This is achieved through the use of iconic signs which connote weeping, at the level of both composition (poietic) and reception (esthetic). The drooping, descending lines which dominate the opening string passage and the following largely wordless vocal exposition (example 7), are part of a well-established connotative musical code bearing some resemblance to the actual sound of crying.²⁷

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 7}

Example 7: Arvo Pärt, *Stabat Mater* (first entry of vocal parts). © Copyright 1985 by Universal Edition A. G., Wien/UE33953

This code – re-enforced here by the inescapable presence of the minor mode – is so well-established that even in these wordless passages the affect is clear (compare, for instance, the style and technique of other Pärt compositions with a similar affective intent, such as the instrumental *Cantus In Memoriam Benjamin Britten* of 1977). The title and text simply flag up the specific nature of the grief. The stylisation and conventionalisation which are part of the semiotic process acquire, in the *Stabat Mater*, the added aspect of a ritualisation of grief, which is integral to this particular religious trope; as Paul Hillier notes, the framing music functions ‘to mark out a ritual space for the setting of the text itself’.²⁸ And the amount of aural space in the piece (the sparse texture; the use of silence), like the presence of wordless textures, allows listeners to fill in their own spiritual experiences, or project them into the composition’s durational frame.²⁹ Such experiences might, for instance, take the form of *negative* transcendence, with silence as numinous holy void.³⁰ Listeners with some semantic understanding of the Latin text have the additional potential to access *radical* transcendence, given the extra communicative layer achieved thereby *within* the numinous infinite. Others

²⁵ The specific semiotic frameworks and terminology drawn on are Pierce’s tripartite division of signs into icon, index and symbol; and Nattiez’s distinction of the level of composition (poietic) from that of reception (esthetic).

²⁶ Pärt authorized a version for SAT choir and string orchestra in 2008, but my comments arise from the original score and its recording on the ECM label (ECM 1325, 1987).

²⁷ As Alex Ross writes: ‘The music of dejection is especially hard to miss. When a person cries, he or she generally makes a noise that slides downwards and then leaps to an even higher pitch to begin the slide again. Not surprisingly, something similar happens in musical laments around the world.’ *Listen To This*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 26.

²⁸ Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.

²⁹ The sense of framing is enhanced by the initial and terminal vocal Amen. As Ivan Moody puts it, ‘the initiate may enter in order to understand the multi-dimensional mystery [...] presented’. *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music* (Joensuu: International Society for Orthodox Church Music, 2014).

³⁰ For more on the theological implications of Pärt’s deployment of silence (out of which *Stabat Mater*’s high opening violin emerges almost imperceptively) – and indeed of his tinitnabuli style generally – see Peter C. Bouteneff, *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence* (Yonkers: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015).

might even find the music transporting them to an experience of *proximate* transcendence: at 25 minutes *Stabat Mater* falls, neatly, just within James's typical half-hour limit for a transient mystical experience.³¹

In writing my unaccompanied solo opera *The Song of Margery Kempe* (2008), one of my first and most important compositional tasks was finding a musical representation of Margery's particular version of that notoriously 'gratuitous' mystical experience, the gift of tears. As described in her spiritual autobiography,³² this goes far beyond a polite sniffle, being characterised variously as weeping, sighing, sobbing, crying, wailing and roaring. Monica Furlong describes Margery's tears as 'noisy and intrusive ones that interrupt church services and tend to irritate well-behaved people', with 'something attention-seeking about them (as also about the rather smug way she tells about them)'. 'Yet [she concludes] they also indicate a level of suffering in Margery, caught as she is between the expectations of a woman in her world [...] and her own intense spiritual longings'.³³

In my musical realisation of Margery's tears, I draw from the same semiotic well as Arvo Pärt, albeit in a much less refined stylisation closer to Alex Ross's previously-cited explanation of the musical lament's origins.

{INSERT MUSICAL EXAMPLE 8}

Example 8: Inglis, *The Song of Margery Kempe*, Scene 2, 'Refrain (Margery's tears)'.

Musical processes: Peter Maxwell Davies

Going beyond the deployment of more-or-less non-developmental musical objects – and following the reference to algorithmic compositional techniques introduced earlier – composers Peter Maxwell Davies and Olivier Messiaen have devised processes *within the music itself* which are analagous to spiritual ones.³⁴ In Messiaen's work this is rooted in Catholic theology (for instance, his translation of the doctrine of the Incarnation into a rigid musical process in the piano piece 'L'échange' from the cycle *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, 1945). In Davies's work, the spiritual reference points are somewhat more diverse, although a pool of source material repeatedly fished is Gregorian chant, as presented in the *Liber Usualis*. The rationale for this has not been fully explored from a theological perspective, but Richard McGregor offers the following speculative insight into the composer's motivation and practice here: 'Although not professing a Christian faith Davies has always had some kind of fascination with the mysteries of religious faith, and the idea of a creative spirit "invoked" by the chants suggests that he uses these chants in an almost superstitious way, to "assist", as it were, in the creation of new music'. Which recalls the

³¹ Qualitative ethnographic research involving an appropriate sample of listeners would be required to evidence these speculative outcomes.

³² *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 1436-8. The two main editions, translated into modern English, are by B. A. Windeatt (London: Penguin Books, 1985, rev. 1994) and Lynn Staley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001). I referred to both (though predominantly Windeatt) in compiling the scenario and libretto of my opera.

³³ Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 37.

³⁴ As such processes are most clearly identified from the score, this might be termed (following Nattiez) the 'neutral' level in the context of semiotic analysis (however, the true neutrality of a level between creator's intention and listeners' perception has been contested).

earlier discussion of ‘mysticism’ in composition and pre-compositional practices, especially if (for instance) we replace Stravinsky’s folk repertoire with (more spiritually loaded) chants. Symbolically, moreover, Davies’s chants are often understood (by the composer at least, and probably also his ‘ideal’ audience) to retain the meaning of their associated texts – including when they are absent, as in the case of instrumental music – and perhaps even the liturgical context (e.g. a specific feast day). Plainchants are on occasion simply quoted, as with the hymn *Ave Maris Stella*, played by the flute towards the end of Davies’s eponymous chamber composition. More typically they are altered, manipulated and transformed, and this is often taken to symbolise a change in meaning – metaphorically, a retrograde of a line could reverse its meaning. Paul Griffiths asserts that ‘Davies has always worked with the view that the statement of a chant melody comes with it implicitly the statement of its text, and so to edit and distort such a melody must be to explore religious truths’.³⁵ This technique is used in many of Davies early – mid-period works, most notably the operas *Taverner* (1970), *The Lighthouse* (1979) and *Resurrection* (1987). In the former work, the musical metaphors support the plot wherein the Catholic composer John Taverner becomes after the Reformation a zealous persecutor of Catholics.³⁶ Plainchant source material is sometimes manipulated by mapping on to one of the symmetrical number squares named after the Ptolemaic planets (with their associated spirits and metals) used by Renaissance occult philosophers for magical practices. In *Ave Maris Stella*, the plainsong melody is manipulated with recourse to the alchemical number-table known as the Magic Square of the Moon. Richard McGregor suggests this square may have had personal significance for the composer of an almost superstitious kind: ‘the significance for Davies of the square of the Moon probably lies in the fact that it was the first magic square that he worked with, in both *Ave Maris Stella* and the First Symphony, works that established his reputation once and for all in the mid-1970s. The square may represent something of a talisman for him, in much the same way that [...] Pentecost plainchants do’.³⁷ Stephen Pruslin offers a hermeneutic reading which sees in the piece a spiritual progression:

Defining the spiritual programme of a work can be difficult and even dangerous, but we can at least point a direction. It is not impossible to see in *Ave Maris* a 24-hour cycle, beginning with a luminous dawn and progressing, though not always in clock order, through the other important points in the physical and spiritual day until it reaches the Hour of the Wolf – the symbolic time between night and day when nocturnal sounds have ceased and the sounds of the dawn have not yet started [...]. Relying on neither text nor theatre, this absolutely pure and abstract piece of chamber music nonetheless comes closer than any other Davies work to bursting into speech.³⁸

An additional factor in its exegesis is the context of the piece’s composition: as a memorial for Hans Juda, treasurer of the ensemble, The Fires of London, for which the piece was written. Another is a Greek text by Roderic Dunnett used to generate musical material and

³⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, (London: Robson Books), 1982, 29.

³⁶ See David Beard, ‘Taverner: an interpretation’, in Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones, eds, *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79-105.

³⁷ Richard McGregor, ‘Peter Maxwell Davies’s sources: reflections on origins, meanings and significance’, in Kenneth Gloag and Nicholas Jones, ed., *Peter Maxwell Davies Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 167-8.

³⁸ Stephen Pruslin, ‘The Triangular Space: Peter Maxwell Davies’s “Ave Maris Stella”’, *Tempo* 120 (1977), 21-22.

reproduced in the score, which ‘has words which invite the reader, with a moral seriousness characteristic of Davies, to travel the path of wisdom and so combat philistinism’.³⁹ In the light of these factors, and of Griffiths’s comments regarding Davies’s manipulation of chant, I interpret the piece as an extended meditation on the mystery of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps even more than a meditation: McGregor speculates that, as well as the square of the Moon, Marian plainchants had a specific personal significance for the composer, given that ‘Davies considered there to be some “connection” between himself and the Virgin Mary’ (whose natal feast day, 8 September, was also his birthday).⁴⁰ Notwithstanding his lack of confessed Christian faith, this is both a profound exercise in inward mysticism and a devout spiritual *imitatio*.

Conclusion

From reviewing the works of the composers explored in this chapter (Hildegard, Couperin, Pärt, Maxwell Davies and myself), we can see that no specific style of Western art music, historical or contemporary, has the monopoly on spiritual potential. Nevertheless, since around 1990 a specific grouping of composers – a trilogy linking Arvo Pärt with Henryk Górecki and Sir John Tavener – have enjoyed wide exposure and commercial success through their conceptualisation and branding as ‘spiritual minimalists’. Undoubtedly, through listening to their music many people have been able to access spiritual, even mystical, experiences within a secular world, beyond the confines of organised religious worship. The sound of sacred minimalism – generally slow-moving, harmonically static, structurally non-developmental – has some similarity to the soundworld (and some of the techniques) of medieval music (overwhelmingly sacred in intent) as well as certain non-Western (sacred) traditions. Yet this is far from being the only musical route to transcendence. Radically contrasting approaches, including the spiritually-indicated modernist soundworlds of not only Maxwell Davies but also Stravinsky, Messiaen, Tippett, Ustvolskaya, Finnis, and indeed some earlier works of Tavener, Pärt and Górecki themselves, could equally be related to the various forms of mystical spirituality presented in this chapter. Potentially, at all phenomenological and semiotic levels: (pre-)compositional process; compositional intent; score; reception. Composers’ own accounts of their compositional processes, and intentions as expressed through titles, vocal texts, interviews, programme notes and other writings, can be scrutinised – as we have seen – for spiritual and mystical content. A fruitful area of further research is the experiences of listeners, and to what extent they are relatable to the forms of transcendence reviewed in this chapter. The varieties of spiritual experience may be as numerous and varied as the people experiencing them.

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³⁹ Griffiths, *Peter Maxwell Davies*, 165.

⁴⁰ McGregor, ‘Peter Maxwell Davies’s sources’, 156.

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