

McGregor, Richard (2012) Towards a taxonomy of musical inspiration. Духовність особистості: методологія, теорія і практика (Personality Spirituality: Methodology, Theory and Practice), 1 . pp. 85-119.

Downloaded from: <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/144/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
  - a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

Since 'inspiration' and 'spiritual' share the same root it follows that the connection between them must exist at a level of understanding – which we would probably characterise as ineffable. Yet we use the term 'inspired' in a way which suggests we have a shared conceptual understanding of what we mean even if we often disagree on the relative value or worth of a particular musical artefact: thus the latest Maxwell Davies quartet (no. 10) can be variously described as inspired, or, trite and derivative – but how can it be both?

We don't, for the most part, begin to use the word 'inspired' of a piece of music until such time as we are confident that a composer has attained some form of 'spiritual' understanding of his/her place in the greater scheme of things. And we generally don't acknowledge that inspiration – if that is what it is – must have its roots somewhere: clearly not in the work of school children then?

If we are to make progress we must start to recognise the roots and be able to define more effectively what we mean by 'inspiration'. Despite the strictures often expressed on the usefulness of sketch studies in analysis – as leading towards an 'unacceptable' metanarrative of the composition process, we can derive some important ideas on the nature of 'inspiration' from the, relatively rare, places where we can detect the composer struggling to 'find' the idea. A particularly good example – and from a composer not normally associated with the idea of extended compositional struggle – is the opening of Wolfgang Rihm's fourth quartet. All this therefore makes discussion of 'inspiration' and 'spirituality' in the music of James MacMillan, for example, that much easier. Or does it?

The paper develops a taxonomy for exploring the links between inspiration and spirituality'

“Songs that seem to come from nowhere”: towards a taxonomy of inspiration.

‘Spiro’ I breathe: the most basic function lies at the root of both the spiritual breathing that we call ‘spirituality’ and at the root of that ‘breathed into’ quality with which we characterize the highest artistic endeavour. We speak of the creative artist as ‘inspired’ – suggesting that something ‘beyond’ has breathed into his or her work. At the same time we call the products of this inspiration ‘inspired’ suggesting that a special quality has been ‘breathed into’ the creation by the artist.

While many people might accept the latter – the creative artist breathing something new or undefined into the work of art, far fewer will accept, or countenance, the notion that the artist has received the ‘inspiration’ from elsewhere, other than in the form of some kind of tangible stimulus, such as a poem, a painting.

Understanding of ‘inspiration’ is fraught with difficulties – interpretation of ‘inspiration’ is a quagmire of personal subjective meaning, non-objective viewpoints and symbolism – acquired meanings such as those explored by John Rahn in his 1993 contribution to *Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics* which was entitled “What is Valuable in Art, and Music still Achieve it’. The result of this morass of personalized interpretations leads to the judging of a creative work by quantifiable methods utilising whatever analytical techniques are currently fashionable, required, or novel at the time -be they Schenkerian, pitch class, structural, post-modern: in the end ‘inspiration’ is relegated to what can be adduced, explained, analysed or otherwise quantified.

I am conscious that what I am about to say flies right in the face of critical theory, which, to quote Jonathan Harvey in his book *In Quest of Spirit* ‘has been concerned with deconstructing the ... composer’s voice, establishing how utterances, ever shifting, ever derivative, in fact depend on historical musical systems, instruments, economic circumstances, social conditioning, codes of understanding, and so on’. But if one can’t say these things at a Music and Spirituality conference where can one say them. It seems to me that in deconstructing the ‘meaning of music’, critical theory may have lost the ‘essence’.

In order to find a way of considering just how inspiration can be understood in relation to musical composition and to be spoken about it seemed to me that it would be helpful to create a vocabulary for dealing with musical ideas when considered within the process of composition. This would then assist in transferring discussion to the realm of spirituality in music. There are three main areas I have currently identified through which to interrogate the concept of ‘inspiration’ and these are ‘validation’, ‘conceptualisation’, and ‘mindfulness’. In what follows I am not going to invoke value judgements on the quality of the musical ideas created, and in any case much has been written about such things in the pages of books on musical aesthetics.

Validation is the understanding of the ‘rightness’ of, in the present case, a musical idea. It can apply not just to a single entity (such as the opening of Beethoven’s fifth symphony) but to the continuity created by that entity through the work, commonly expressed through form and structure but equally expressed through realization of aesthetic intent. A good example of this latter can be found in the opening movement of Wolfgang Rihm’s fourth quartet, or rather, by considering those versions of the opening which did not make it to completion. What makes Rihm’s work interesting in this context is that he rarely sketches ideas and those that are have the appearance of random jottings. In an interview (in English) in 2000 he said of these ideas:

Sometimes a piece is started and I don’t know where it belongs, and it becomes the middle of the piece, and the following week it’s the end, and the next day maybe it’s the beginning.

His compositional method is ‘spontaneous’ (his word) in that he professes not to plan in advance, and I shall return to this aspect later. As a result there are a large number of sketches for new works which do not get beyond the first 6 bars or so. How does he know what is ‘right’ or does he just write (no pun intended) whatever comes into his head – how is the compositional decision ‘validated’. Some critics might want to assert that that is exactly because he writes the first thing that comes into his head that his work is uneven and inconsistent.

However the fourth quartet opening does give a useful indication of the process which might otherwise take place inside his head and therefore be inaccessible. This quartet is one a group of works which mark out a turning point in Rihm’s output and as such allows an insight into the processes of ‘validation’ in a composition. The handout contains extracts from (7) attempts at continuity for a particular motif. Without the benefit of sketches the analyst might assume that the main thematic idea found at the opening of the 4<sup>th</sup> quartet – and here as the single violin statement beginning at line two of Version 7– might correspond to Adorno’s ‘Einfall’ – variously translated from Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music* as ‘the irreducibly subjective element’, the ‘inspirational occurrence bordering on revelation’ or, unhelpfully, in a recent translation, just, the ‘thematic idea’. Yet clearly with six previous versions all rejected, the question must be, what was wrong with them?

However I want to take a different approach. There are several important reasons why a thematic idea such as this one become ‘validated’ within the compositional process. I will detail just three sub categories:

The idea has to be validated by context. Each time the motif makes its appearance in each of these extracts it is in a different context. To take just two instances. Version 1 has the motif in a *Klangfarbenmelodie* version passed from violin one to violin 2 and viola. It has no integral motivic coherence at this point. Although it is difficult to be hard and fast about the order of the sketches, I believe this to be the earliest sketch for the quartet. Version 3 on the other hand HAS a motivic coherence and crucially

includes the introduction of a rest at the end of the motif, BUT it has no clear continuity and is abandoned after the second bar. It is only when the silence increases in length and effectively becomes part of the motif that continuity is achieved – as in Version 7.

The second validation process that takes place is one of intervallic content. This is found in the, probably unconscious on Rihm's part, realization of the internal symmetry of the opening 5 pitches where Eb is the central hub, and the consequent pairing of tone/semitone above and below this pitch which, like Webern's seed, encourages growth and allows the motif to begin to flower.

The third validation process is one of detail (such as register, tempo or articulation). This particular aspect is missing from Rihm's score so it might seem strange to consider it in its absence. But it is that very absence that tells us something about the process of 'inspiration' which created this musical entity. If you look at the final version you would find that every note has an articulation mark or an individual dynamic mark. This indeed became a crucial feature of his compositional style from the early 80s onwards. It is a result of what he described in interview as 'the location of the note, *die Lage*, and its instrumental reality' (I will return to this later). You will notice that this feature emerges at the very end of the extract when all four strings are notated. Its absence at first in Version 7 suggests here Rihm was so intent on developing the motivic idea with which had struggled as a result this aspect was deemed of lesser importance and therefore superseded in the compositional hierarchy. Using just the final full score this insight into the creative process is simply not possible.

It is only when the necessary elements of the process are validated by the composition dialectic that the 'right' continuation suggests itself to the composer and hence version 7 which sweeps away all the previous working and the composition of the work begins. You'll note that Rihm dates this page exactly, a sure sign that his compositional imperatives have been satisfied and he is prepared to confirm the status of the material.

The second taxonomic category for inspiration which I have defined is that of 'conceptualisation'. This is, in part, the 'working out', *Die Arbeit*, in Adorno's terms. However there are various sub categories operating here too.

This phase, broadly incorporating the phase which has sometimes, though not uncritically, been related to Plato's 'furor poeticus' as discussed by Dahlhaus in his *Aesthetics of Music* – the divine madness – that conceives the shape and form of a work, as it were, in a short time frame. This was the stage that Stravinsky insisted should happen before the actual composition of the work onto paper takes place, although Copland disagreed. There can, in reality, be few composers who see every detail of a work before they begin writing. In theory, Wolfgang Rihm's method of 'spontaneous composition' would actually preclude this stage altogether – relying on intuition, experience, critical judgment etc to give shape to the whole, If it could

be proved there were no unconscious structuring processes operating in the composer's mind then one might accept that whatever resulted in the work would be truly random. I am not qualified to speak of Rihm's teacher Stockhausen's Moment Form which on the face of it has no relationship to a structural hierarchy but close analysis of the results of Rihm's 'spontaneous' method (the compositional son of Moment Form) reveals that structure of some sort has apparently imposed itself, that is rather than having been imposed consciously by the composer on the work in question. Since they have somewhat specific and circumscribed usages within musical vocabulary rather than use the terms form or structure for this sub-category I have preferred to use 'essence'.

It seems that even if composers are not aware of it, though some are, it is clear that essence – intuitive structuring if you will, IS a key element in the working out of most compositions even when the specific details are apparently unknown to the composer or when he or she is unable to articulate the process in words.

A second sub category of 'conceptualisation' is 'purposefulness'. To illustrate this I draw on a work by James MacMillan *Veni Veni Emmanuel*, which I will say some more about later. In a work with an avowedly spiritual programme, message or intent this category, can deal with those places where the composer, with knowing or without, manipulates the musical material such that their particular spiritual understandings are made manifest. Thus in the central slow chant-like section of *Veni Veni Emmanuel* – the *Gaude Gaude*, Macmillan introduces a second plainchant (that is additional to the original from which the work's title comes). That plainchant *Ubi Caritas* becomes literally the embodiment of Jesus in the work. In the *Gaude* section it comes for the first time at the point of the Golden Section – a fact of which, in this piece, MacMillan says, he was unaware. A further example of which he probably WAS aware, was the emphasis on the pedal pitch C sharp which, despite the lack of a key based framework (the tonality is more generally modal) leading over a very long period of time to the D starting pitch of the climatic statement of *Ubi Caritas* representing Easter. MacMillan speaks of the work as making a liturgical journey from Advent to Easter: hence the purposefulness, but in terms of the whole work this is only part of the symbolic 'meaning'.

My final area to consider links directly to that pedal C sharp just referred to because it deals with the intent of the composer and the awareness of the varying levels of meaning he or she is creating and how aware or otherwise he or she is of them.

The quotation which is the opening of title of this paper comes from Boyd and George-Warren's 1992 book 'Musicians in tune' and in context is 'by completely concentrating on the music they're playing or writing, musicians are able to open themselves up to a peak experience. It is as if intense concentration can push the conscious mind away from self-consciousness' and the unconscious is allowed to filter through. The result can be songs that seem to come from nowhere...' This third stage in the process of inspiration is therefore an extension of Adorno's

third aspect: that of ‘becoming’ – (‘Werden’).

I have chosen to relate this stage to the concept of mindfulness which has been gaining greater ground recently, having come from meditative practices and in particular Buddhism, it has been increasingly adopted in psychiatric and therapy settings as a means to focus the mind on the present moment. The concept will be familiar to some, but for those who aren't, it might briefly be categorized as a technique for bringing awareness back (that is. from the past or the future) into the present moment. Through sitting themselves in the present instant practitioners are able to view inner and outer reality - to notice that the mind is constantly commenting or making judgements – and by so noticing choose whether the thoughts are of value, or not, for a particular context.

Music's relationship to mindfulness is almost exclusively found presently in its use as a tool to aid such focusing of the mind – much as when music is used as a background for meditation. However I suggest that this is a technique that composers use, often unconsciously in the act of composition which allows them to focus on the relationship of the moment to the whole and hence a key component in defining the nature of inspiration. When Jonathan Harvey speaks of ‘the still point of pure awareness’, notwithstanding its original context as a stage in the search for ‘spirit’ within compositional contexts, it is certainly a possible definition of the psychological state of the composer in the act of composition within the framework suggested by the concept of mindfulness.

If we accept that mindfulness as a state of mind where judgements and commentary from the past are simply noticed but potentially ignored it is possible to re-evaluate some of the more paradoxical elements of a composer's output. For reasons of time I will just adduce one example here. Maxwell Davies is often criticized for his use of the idea of ‘tonics and dominants’ since the hierarchy implied is not relevant to his music in terms of past, and generally understood, use of the terms. How can Davies possibly not carry into HIS concept the echoes of the earlier usage and sit outside this historical context. With mindfulness it can, because mindfulness allows that concepts from the past can be noticed but rejected as not of value in the present case, while recognizing that they exist. Davies can therefore speak of tonics and dominants because the concept exists in his compositional mind without direct relationship to the hierarchical model of the tonal system and its implied necessary relationships– his critical judgment has removed this aspect of past usage as having no meaning or value in the context he has created. However the terminology is a barrier to those who encounter it because they have not undertaken the same process.

On the other hand for a composer MacMillan whose religious beliefs lead him to think of the initial stimulus, for example the advent plainchant of that name that underpins ‘Veni veni Emmanuel’ as being, to use his words, ‘transubstantiated into the musical’, it might be appropriate to apply the term ‘transcendental’ to the mindfulness processes in operation, although the word has probably too many connotations. However unlike the Maxwell Davies example where the

underlying concept is recognized and rejected as having no value in the present context, MacMillan affirms the spiritual nature of his own experience by allowing the concept to have a direct significance for him within his own spiritual understanding and in relation to the specific context of the work. Therefore the spiritual experience is allowed to be of value and therefore impacts on the procedures and ideas formulated as the composition progresses.

Invoking the concept of mindfulness as a way of understanding the compositional process can perhaps afford an insight into Rihm's 'spontaneous composition' and is suggested by some of the statements he makes in his writings. Very little of Rihm's poetics are available in English but interviewed in 2000 he elaborated on some aspects of the spontaneous compositional process which might be better understood lying within the state of increased awareness which characterizes mindfulness. So when he says:

It's very difficult to speak about it because it's something which has to do with nerves and also the chemistry within your body;

Yes, I change everything very much, because changing is for me synonymous with composing

I work in my head and I don't need so much paper because there is enough brain space, and I have a wonderful ability to concentrate

The decision as to what I do creates the hierarchy ... but all that I do is *my* decision. If you like, I am a *decisionist*!

For me it's composing and the integrity of knowledge, the location of the note, *die Lage*, and its instrumental reality

we understand that the increased awareness of which he speaks is part of the nature of his inspiration which can be better understood within the framework of mindfulness.

Finally then, in order to conclude this necessarily brief discussion of my elaboration of a possible taxonomy for inspiration it's important to re-iterate that this is not an answer to the problem of talking about inspiration but step on the way to being able to bring into a meaningful musical discourse some characteristics of the phenomenon. I identified three main areas elaborations of Adorno's *Einfall*. *Die Arbeit* and *Werden*, which I have termed validation, conceptualisation, and mindfulness. Within validation I explored context, content and detail; within conceptualisation, I explored essence and purposefulness; but within mindfulness I did not presently sub-categorise except to possibly invoke the transcendental.