

# Music and Psi

This article explores the presence of music in different paranormal contexts: as the agent in extra sensory perception experiments and in other altered states of consciousness; where music is heard in the absence of any apparent source; and music allegedly communicated through mediums by dead composers and musicians.

## ESP Experiments

The '[ganzfeld technique](#)' was first introduced to the field by psi experimenter [Charles Honorton](#), who suggested that psi functioning is enhanced when the receiver is 'in a state of sensory relaxation and is minimally influenced by ordinary perception and proprioception'.<sup>1</sup> To test this, he conducted an experiment which subjected participants to sensory deprivation and, while they were in this state, asked them to try to identify pictures that a 'sender' at a distance was attempting to transmit.

Of the available methods of sensory deprivation, the ganzfeld (whole field) technique – although not specifically developed for this purpose<sup>2</sup> – is widely accepted as being the most conducive to the manifestation of ESP.<sup>3</sup> It uses sensory masking, achieved by placing the subject in a field of diffused red light and playing white noise through headphones while he or she sits or lies comfortably. This greatly reduces the number of sensory cues, allowing subconscious thoughts and feelings to manifest.

In a 1997 report, American parapsychologist Kathy Dalton drew links between creativity and psi in ganzfeld sessions using musicians, artists, creative writers and actors.<sup>4</sup> In her experiment, the musicians in particular scored significantly above chance. Further results suggested that dynamic targets might be more conducive to the production of psi than static ones,<sup>5</sup> while results of experiments by Dutch parapsychologist [Dick Bierman](#) suggested that emotional targets might be similarly productive.<sup>6</sup>

Experiments using music as the sending target have not often been carried out. Brief reports of the use of music appeared in the *Journal of Parapsychology*<sup>7</sup> and in the *Parapsychology Bulletin*;<sup>8</sup> however, the ganzfeld procedure was not used and the participants listened to simple melodies played on a variety of instruments, precluding the possibility of an emotional response from the sender. The results were those expected by chance. [Jürgen Keil](#) conducted tests at Duke University using music as the sending agent<sup>9</sup> but again the ganzfeld procedure was not used and the music was chosen by the subjects themselves. Further to this, an exploratory study was designed by Altom and Braud<sup>10</sup> to determine whether the use of musical targets raises any unique difficulties.

Melvyn Willin undertook trials between 1994 and 1996 in several different locations, exploring the relationship between music and telepathy in a controlled environment.<sup>11</sup> Many receivers 'heard' music that was being sent to them

telepathically, although since they understood the nature of the experiment this was to be expected. However, few were willing to communicate what they heard in song. Instead they gave general information such as: 'I can hear string music' and 'I can hear drums beating', while pitch and timbre were spoken of in similarly general terms. Where receivers scored most highly was in their recognition of the 'feel' of the music rather than in specific terms.

The results were analysed according to a number of factors, such as the pairings in terms of gender and relationship, the professions of the participants, and the music chosen.<sup>12</sup> (Statistical analysis was only applied to data where the numbers involved were sufficiently large. In calculating the standard deviation used in the z scores, N rather than N-1 was used, since the results applied only to the population of the individuals taking part in the experiment.) The results indicated that women were more likely than men to score hits in the roles of both receiver and sender. Men achieved a higher hit rate when participating as senders, although not when other men acted as receivers.<sup>13</sup> Friends were more likely to achieve positive results than any other relationships.

The professions of the receivers reflected the variety of their backgrounds and included teachers, students, administrative workers and self-styled housewives. There was similar diversity of ages. There was a falling-off effect during the experiment with the first ten trials achieving a 50% hit rate ( $z = 1.92$ ); the final ten trials dropped to 10% ( $z = -1.03$ ). In each of the trials there was a possibility of any one of four pieces of music, labelled a, b, c, or d, being the target piece once the tape had been randomly selected. The music receiving the highest number of hits (29%) was from the a group, which consisted of more emotional and programmatic music.<sup>14</sup>

Successful track chosen	Number of times chosen	z scores	Percentage hit rate
a	10	1.57	42%
b	5	-0.39	21%
c	3	1.17	13%
d	6	0.00	25%

There was an overall hit rate of 24% where chance would have indicated 25% which is not therefore statistically significant.

A further experiment was undertaken in 1996, using selected participants from the initial experiment who had achieved noteworthy scores. This aimed to investigate the possibility that certain individuals might have sensitivity in ESP, however the results were inconclusive, with the exception of one pair of participants who scored five hits in six trials.[15](#)

## Music and Altered States of Consciousness

### Near-Death Experiences

Music is often reported in accounts of the so-called '[near-death experience](#)' (NDE).

Music is used in a therapeutic context, and, by influencing the electro-conductivity of the body, is thought by some to act as a bridge between the 'real and the unreal' (the 'conscious and the unconscious'), bringing about personal transformations.[16](#)

Composers have sometimes chosen death as a source of inspiration, in works such as *Death and the Maiden* by Franz Schubert, *Death and Transfiguration* by Richard Strauss and *The Island of the Dead* by Serge Rachmaninoff. In Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, the text by Roman Catholic Cardinal John Newman tells the story of a man's death and his soul's journey into the next world.

Music is often heard at the time of a person's death.[17](#) An example is the 'Eton College Case':[18](#) a report sent in 1884 to the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR) by one of the school's teachers regarding the death of his mother three years earlier. The writer stated that immediately after she died, 'low, soft music, exceedingly sweet, as of three girls' voices', was heard by several people present.[19](#) Similar examples are to be found in the literature of the SPR, the College of Psychic Studies and other sources.[20](#)

Parapsychology author [D Scott Rogo](#)[21](#) gives examples reported by previous authors such as [Robert Crookall](#) in the 1960s and Raymond Moody in the 1970s, along with some of his own discovery.[22](#) He believed that the lack of intimacy caused by the hospitalisation of death tended to inhibit such occurrences; also that few researchers sought them out.

British NDE researcher Margot Grey found that 11% of NDErs in her study heard the 'music of the spheres'.[23](#) While Gilles Bédard spent five months on the brink of death with Crohn's disease in 1973, he heard powerful music. Striving afterwards to reproduce it, he found the nearest he could get was a combination of Tangerine Dream's 'Mysterious Semblance at the Strand of Nightmares', from the album *Phaedra*, and Steve Roach's 'Structures from Silence'.[24](#)

An enquiry by Melvyn Willin in 2009 led to the discovery of a railway accident survivor who found himself subsequently inspired to record his experience in art and music, even though he had no previous experience in the classical genre. The resulting composition, *The Divine Light*, was composed by David Ditchfield.[25](#)

Other relatively recent examples have included the experiences of the violinist Paul Robertson, who heard 'ragas' when he believed himself close to death, and John

Tavener's *Towards Silence*, a complete work devoted to the subject that received its first public performance on 6 July 2009 in Winchester Cathedral.<sup>[26](#)</sup>

Comments by these and others suggest that they sensed rather than heard the music, and that words are generally inadequate to explain it. Nevertheless, they concur that it appears to be caused by some external agent.

## **Other Altered States**

Many composers have emphasised the importance of mystical experiences in the creative process, referring either to God or to an unnamed mystical source. Brahms stated: 'Straight away the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God ... measure by measure, the finished product is revealed to me when I am in those rare, inspired moods'.<sup>[27](#)</sup> Puccini talked of 'a supernatural influence which qualifies me to receive Divine truths'.<sup>[28](#)</sup> Wagner envisioned himself lying at the bottom of the Rhine, whereupon the opening music of *Das Rheingold* came to him. Bruch and Berlioz both spoke of musical ideas coming to them in dreams.<sup>[29](#)</sup> Tartini wrote of the ravishing music that came to him in a dream, and which he tried in vain to reproduce:

[It] is indeed the best that I ever wrote, and I still call it *The Devil's Trill*, but the difference between it and that which so moved me is so great that I would have destroyed my instrument and have said farewell to music forever if it had been possible for me to live without the enjoyment it affords me.<sup>[30](#)</sup>

Musicians also frequently feel inspired to perform far beyond their normal capacity, as the English concert pianist John Lill has described at length.<sup>[31](#)</sup> Trance states enhanced or instigated by music are commonplace in ritual and shamanistic practices.<sup>[32](#)</sup> In an investigation by Willin, a lightly entranced musician was temporarily able to play his instrument to a standard far beyond his normal capability (he attributed this to a previous life when he believed himself to possess the appropriate advanced technique).<sup>[33](#)</sup> Similar work was undertaken by Vladimir Raikov, a Russian psychiatrist in the 1960s.

However, the ability of music to lead directly to altered states of consciousness is uncertain. The psychology of music is well represented by academics such as Eric Clarke (Heather Professor of Music, Oxford University) and John Sloboda (research professor, Guildhall School of Music, London). The power of music to heal, both within and outside of music therapy, is also controversial.<sup>[34](#)</sup>

## **Music Heard in the Absence of a Source**

References to anomalous 'angelic music' are frequently found in early manuscripts.<sup>[35](#)</sup> However, they should be viewed with caution: the suggestion of an external origin may have been inserted by translation, where this was not originally meant, while authors of a deeply religious or mystical nature may have externalized an aspect of deeply-held beliefs.

Historical references to apparitional or hallucinated music are not limited to choral phenomena. The Protestant reformer John Calvin stated that on 9 December 1562,

he heard 'a very loud sound of drums used in war', even though nothing of the kind was to be seen anywhere around.<sup>36</sup> At this moment – unknown to him – a Protestant army supported by Swiss mercenaries was suffering a bloody defeat at the Battle of Dreux in northern France.

A famous instance of inexplicable drumming is the case known as 'The Drummer of Tedworth' which allegedly produced poltergeist characteristics, and also gave rise to music from an unknown source, reported by Joseph Glanvill, a chaplain to Charles II and a Fellow of the Royal Society.<sup>37</sup>

Another well-documented episode was the [alleged time-slip](#) experienced in 1901 by CAE Moberly and EF Jourdain, respectively Principal and Vice-Principal of St Hugh's College, Oxford, during a visit to the Palace of Versailles. On their way to visit the Petit Trianon they became lost and experienced feelings of depression. After various strange occurrences, they heard 'faint music, as of a band, not far off'. It was playing very light music with a good deal of repetition in it. Both voices [spoken] and music were diminished in tone, as in a phonograph, unnatural. The pitch of the band was lower than usual. The sounds were intermittent.'<sup>38</sup>

Music is a frequent feature in reports of hauntings, in castles, churches and abbeys, palaces and country houses, inns, and so forth, although these are generally uncertain. Reports of castle haunts that involve music include Herstmonceaux, Hailsham, East Sussex, Duntrune Castle, Kilmartin, Argyl, Culzean Castle, Maybole, Ayr and many more.<sup>39</sup> Well-documented cases in religious locations<sup>40</sup> include the Abbey of Jumieges in France,<sup>41</sup> Borley Church in Essex and St Albans Abbey.<sup>42</sup> The reported sounds include church organs, bagpipes (in Scotland), drums and harps, church bells, chanting and whistling.

The music heard in country houses and palaces is more varied, ranging from harpsichord music being reported in Sandford Orcas, Sherborne, Dorset to a trumpet blast in the cellar of the Treasurer's House, York.<sup>43</sup> Reports relating to pubs and inns include piano music at the Crown Hotel, Poole, Dorset and the sounds of violin music at the White Hart, Chalfont St Peter, Bucks.<sup>44</sup>

There are many reports of anomalous music heard in outdoor locations such as seascapes, lakes and pools, rivers, wells, hills and mountains (often in the realm of folklore, where fairies or mermaids are said to be the performers.<sup>45</sup>) Sunken bells make up the majority of reports from water-based locations, such as Dunwich, Suffolk, Walton-on-the-Naze, Essex and Tunstall Pool, Norfolk. Singing can allegedly be heard at, for example, Cley Hill, Warminster, Wiltshire.

Little research has been carried out into the ability of the brain to 'hallucinate' music. One tantalising clue comes from the work of the Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, who found that electrical stimulation of the sensory cortex in some of his patients caused musical sensations, which the patient was able to discuss.<sup>46</sup> It may be speculated that the brain centres that cause such sensations may be stimulated by external events.

## **Mediumistic Music**

Several people – not all of them mediums – have described being in direct contact with the spirits of departed composers and performers, and playing new compositions which they say were channelled through them. One was the nineteenth century medium [Daniel Dunglas Home](#) who, in addition to ‘remotely’ playing instruments in conditions that precluded conjuring, is said also to have occasioned music from unknown sources.[47](#) The French musical medium George Aubert – who claimed a very limited ability to play the piano, and little interest in music – was able in an entranced state to play works he said were dictated to him by Chopin, Schumann, Rubinstein, Mozart, Glinka, Liszt, Schubert, and especially Beethoven and Mendelssohn.[48](#) Experiments with Aubert were carried out at the Institut General Psychologique.[49](#)

Other musical mediums provided documentary evidence of their own experiences. Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899) said a cantata called *The Song of the Stars* that she wrote for her choir came to her when she was in an inspired state.[50](#) Jesse Shepard (1849–1927), the most celebrated musical medium of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, who performed for the nobility in many countries,[51](#) claimed to be possessed by the spirits of Mozart, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Rossini and other composers; one of his feats was an ability to sing through the whole range from bass to soprano.[52](#)

Contact from dead composers is also alleged to have been made with people who did not otherwise have mediumistic ability. Florizel von Reuter (1890–1985), a professional violinist, said that whilst he was attending a séance the spirit of Paganini manifested itself to him, and that other spirit contacts followed.[53](#) A Yorkshire vicar, Charles Tweedale, received information supposedly from Stradivarius concerning the details of the varnish he applied to his famous violins.[54](#) The concert violinist Jelly d’ Aranyi (1895–1966) said she received advice from the spirit world concerning her performance of a Bach sonata, and that in March 1933 she was contacted by the spirit of Robert Schumann via an Ouija board and informed that she should find and play a posthumous work by the composer for violin and piano. Various scores were found which related to the lost concerto, confirming for Jelly what she had been told concerning the work’s completion.[55](#)

During the 1970s, several mediums claimed to be in contact with deceased composers and to be channelling their music. Clifford Enticknap believed he was a channel for Handel’s music, and wrote an oratorio called *Beyond the Veil*, loosely in the style of Handel.

The most prominent twentieth-century of the music medium is Rosemary Brown (1916–2001). She described the Hungarian composer Liszt appearing to her one day, and taking over her hands to play music not of her creation. During a period of approximately twenty years she produced a stream of music allegedly dictated to her by a variety of dead composers. The authenticity of Brown’s music has aroused considerable controversy, some experts considering them simple pastiches, others praising their quality.[56](#)

The authenticity of the claims is seldom acknowledged. With the exception of Jelly d’ Aranyi, none is mentioned in the current edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*.

## Investigations of modern musical mediums

In the 1990s, Melvyn Willin reported an investigation of one woman and five men who claimed contact with dead composers and performers. The subjects were interviewed and their music, where appropriate, was analysed and discussed by professional musicians.[57](#)

Medium	Previous musical knowledge	Music produced	Comparison with actual composer/performer	Other comments
H (female)	None	Melody only, said to come from Tchaikovsky	n/a (no harmony)	Worked out on an electronic keyboard
L (male)	Singing lessons, extent unverified	Performance of operatic songs inspired by Caruso	Comparable power, inferior technique	Impressive musical performance
M (male)	Extensive musical knowledge	Symphony from Arnold Bax	Quality comparable to Bax	Possibly using own musical knowledge
W (male)	Piano teacher	Chopin dictation	Pastiche of Chopin	Possibly using own musical knowledge
T (male)	Some theoretical knowledge	Piano works mainly from Beethoven	Pastiche of Beethoven	Possible creative surge in latter years

M's Bax work was of a superior quality. The music made by the other participants was generally of good amateur quality, however none compared favourably with the music of the composers alleged to have dictated it. Mediums blamed the transmission from the spirit world to the material world, also the limitations of their own brains, which they said obstructed the process to the detriment of the music. However, on some occasions the music or performance were felt to be exactly in accordance with the spirits' wishes, and yet even in such cases the results remained unconvincing. As psychologist John Sloboda said of Rosemary Brown in



an assessment of her music, they seemingly lacked any of the 'vision' that the composers showed in such abundance during their lives.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, whether the professed beliefs of these musical mediums is grounded in fact, self-deception or deliberate fraud, it is clear that they have achieved results beyond what might be expected given the limitations of their training and musical knowledge.

Most seemed certain that dead composers were attempting to bring new music into the world through their intermediary mediumship. Most did not seek financial gain, but did look for public recognition. Some insisted on their relative lack of musical training; however there were examples of childhood piano lessons and considerable practice during adulthood. Willin speculated that the activity filled an emotional gap in these individuals' later lives, perhaps further stimulated by a sense of life nearing conclusion.

A possible reason for the claims of spirit dictation could be a desire for a feeling of personal importance, since an amateur musician writing a pleasant piece of music does not have the same impact on friends or the general public as the claim of divine intervention. Also, criticism of the music could be deflected towards the spirit composer or transmission problems rather than needing to be responded to on a personal level.

Melvyn Willin

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## Endnotes

### Footnotes

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- [2](#). Honorton (1977).
- [3](#). Honorton et al. (1990).
- [4](#). Dalton (1997).
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- [6](#). Bierman (1995 & 1997).
- [7](#). Shulman (1938), 322-25.
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- [37.](#) Glanvill (1681).
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- [39.](#) For a much expanded list see Willin, (1999).
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- [52.](#) Campbell Holmes (1925).
- [53.](#) von Reuter (1931).
- [54.](#) Tweedale (1940).
- [55.](#) Palmstierna (1937).
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