

Children's spirituality and music

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▶ Spirituality

The language of children's spirituality is relatively new. For many years, the terms 'spirituality' and 'faith' have been regarded as synonymous by educators and religious leaders alike; the ambiguity through history of the distinction between religion and spirituality also may have deemed spiritual education for children as unnecessary, considering them only capable of spiritual experience at an age where they are able to understand it.

However in recent years, developments in research and education have led to a new consideration and definition of spirituality for children. Furthermore this has led to recognition that children have something to teach us. Jill Fuller says, "Children have much to teach us - the wonder of a small child seeing snow for the first time can awaken our sense of the miraculous."

Elaine McCreery says that spirituality is 'an awareness that there is something other, something greater than the course of everyday events' but it is not easily defined. However, there is a strong belief amongst recent scholars that spirituality is innate and universal. Therefore all peoples of all ages can have spiritual experiences. It is made tangible in its distinction from, but relationship with faith: it is experienced as warmth, love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery and personal devotions like prayer and meditation. From an anthropological viewpoint, Alister Hardy maintains that spirituality is biological, therefore transcendent over all religions and cultures, contributing to the survival of the evolving individual.

David Hay and Rebecca Nye, authors of the book 'The Spirit of the Child' (1998) and researchers who identified many spiritual aspects in children's conversations, believe spirituality to be an innate human phenomenon autonomous from religion that can find expression in every dimension of life, including day to day occurrences. Nevertheless, they express a belief that spirituality also needs to be nurtured within some agreed metanarrative, of which organised religion can be a part.

From a biblical perspective, many verses endorse this viewpoint.

Genesis 1: 26. "And now we will make human beings; they will be like us and resemble us."

Genesis 1: 27. "So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female."

1 Corinthians 3 :10. "Surely you know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you."

Ephesians 2: 10. "God has made us what we are....."

McGrath writes that Christian tradition has insisted that humanity is the height of God's creation. The idea of 'imago dei' or 'image of God' expressed in Genesis 1:27 gives weight to this claim and the first chapter of this book recounts how God looked at his creation and saw that it was good. Other passages such as Psalm 139 - a meditation on the author's perception of God's purpose and design for life - reflect the understanding of the unique relationship between man and God. Augustine (cited by McGrath 1994, p.369) argues that the central element of human nature is the innate ability to relate to God, who made humans as spiritual beings in the way that he himself is spiritual. His desire is to be in relationship with his creation.

Therefore, it is the task of Christian educators to identify and nurture the spirituality of our children, in order to lead them into and strengthen their relationship with our creator God through faith and discipleship.

▶ Music

My belief is that music is a wonderful vehicle for expression, growth and the nurture of spirituality. Stravinsky, a composer of the 20th Century said:

God is the greatest musician of all times, the greatest composer. Since I myself was created, I cannot help having the desire to create.

His sentiment is that art is spiritual because it is essentially born of the Spirit: he believes that human creativity is a reflection of divine creativity and can become a communication channel between God and man. It taps into a deep longing for the sacred in contemporary life, touching people at a level beyond and beneath emotion, will and intellect. It draws on a spiritual world beyond everyday and the listener, composer or performer is drawn into that world as well. Music has always been part of church life. In the Middle Ages, texts were set, as were liturgy & responses. In many churches today, psalms, the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis will be sung at evensong.. Biblical passages have become great works in Oratorio form e.g. Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, played regularly at Easter, Handel's Messiah, Mendelssohn's Elijah and Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms." This work was composed for the 'Glory of God,' his essential aim being to 'promote a communion, a union of man with his fellow man and with the Supreme Being.'

My belief is also that we are innately creative beings. Let's look at the bible again:

Genesis 1:1. "In the beginning, God created the universe."

Psalm 33:9. "When He spoke, the world was created: at his command everything appeared."

John 1: 3. "Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him."

If we are made in the image of a creator God, therefore we must be creative people! And through creating, we can cultivate our understanding of who God is and develop in our ability to relate to Him

As an educator, my aim is to use Music to nurture innate spirituality in children using a child-centred approach and lead them towards:

- ❖ the truth about Jesus
- ❖ a deeper understanding of God

I fully believe that using music is a powerful way of teaching the truth about God and I have used music

many times in school as part of R.E. or the spiritual life of the school. Children have come to learn about God for themselves by being involved in and engaging with a bible passage or story. The joy of group composition is that the music starts from the child. Each has a part to play which has come from within and is of his or her own creating. The blending of all these ideas and elements is a unifying experience; it is about community, belonging and inclusion; about bonds that do not restrain, but encourage corporate action. No-one is wrong and each child has a necessary contribution to make. I recommend you to "have a go" even if you have a limited number of instruments, or even if you feel shy of music!!

Percussion instruments that I recommend you to have in your stock are:

rain sticks; finger cymbals; claves and woodblocks; a cymbals; a sort of chime bars; a tambourine; a tambour; a drum; a triangle and if at all possible a glockenspiel or xylophone. It can be an expensive task to build up a set of instruments, but if they are looked after well, they will last for a long time and provide the children with an amazing wealth of opportunity for co-operative activity. But equally you can make sounds using your body, or found sounds. You will be surprised what effects you can make by rustling empty crisp packets, tearing newspaper and hitting or shaking a Pringles tube (empty or full!)

Creating music is great fun and the children will have a wonderful time.

▶ Examples and ideas

The following examples come from my own experiences of working with children in churches and schools, from a variety of faith and no faith backgrounds

Some experiences of awe and wonder are profound moments and invite us to consider the holy. Classroom percussion instruments offer a whole range of colours, sounds and in combination, textures. Such experiences can be recreated through sound. For example group work composition can portray the fun of a walk through the park on an autumn day. The rainmaker is a fantastic instrument, which when explored to its full potential by scraping, tapping, shaking etc., can create up to 10 or more sounds. The shakers, woodblocks, the guiro and vibraslap create the crunching of the leaves, and the piano played on high keys represent the pitter, patter of spots of rain. The gentle beating of "tingling" instruments such as chime bars, triangle and finger cymbals always evoke a sense of delight and wonder, akin to the sparkling sun.

Group work composition can also portray the anguish of war. War poetry or scenes on TV can evoke a sense of anger and music can become a vehicle for channelling such emotion. The pounding of a drum drives a sense of edginess; chime bars played simultaneously with alternate combinations of white and black notes, create the horror, confusion and anguish of war, particularly if getting louder throughout the piece. The clatter of the vibraslap continuously, represents the rapid firing of bullets and the intermittent clash of the cymbal increases suspense.

But after war, comes peace. A contrasting piece of music, played slowly and quietly gives a contrast and a sense of relief. It leads us in remembrance of those who live or have lived through the throws of War and spurs us to pray for them and for peace in our world. This activity has been particularly poignant for me when visiting Croatia. I was teaching a group of theological students in Osijek, a place that over a decade ago was the victim of the civil war and bomb attacks in the Yugoslavian states. In the minds of the students were memories of bomb attacks and fear for life and not far from the place in which we worked, were disused buildings, ruined by the bombs and there, became a reminder of that horrific experience. The music served as a group response to their own feelings towards war and their prayer for continued peace.

Creation provides a constant array of experiences of wonder - all of which can be appreciated and investigated through creative music. Michael Mitton says: "As the Celtic peoples were converted to Christ, it must have been a delight to them to find a faith that was so filled with creative life, thereby affirming their

delight in music and art." Celtic music was greatly influenced by creation. It was quite customary therefore for people to stand on the seashore and sing music inspired by the sound of the waves! You can portray many aspects of creation in sound, for example:

wind and water
light and fire
sun, moon and stars (space)
ice and snow
the sea
the seasons
the weather
growth (plants \ people)
desert and drought
use photographs of other countries as a stimulus
look at the "Creation Psalms" e.g. Psalms 8, 24, 33.
Use poetry (their own or those found in anthologies) as a stimulus

Also it is good to listen to music by famous composers on similar themes, for example:

The Planet suite by Holst
La Mer (The Sea) by Debussy
Symphonia Antarctica by Vaughan Williams
The Four Seasons by Vivaldi
The Symphony of Psalms by Stravinsky.

June Tillman says: "we can use the listening mode of musical experience for our own healing, for resolving inner conflicts. The listener engages with the performer and composer in longing for peace, longing for uplift and longing for unity."

Music, be that a performance or a listening activity, can be a tool for getting in tune with God before prayer and worship. It will help to focus minds on God.

✪ Here are some examples of music that can be used as a lead in to prayer and worship:

Adagio for Strings by Samuel Barber
Nimrod from the Enigma Variations by Elgar

Singing rounds and chants are also effective ways of leading into prayer. Those from the Taize community are popular, and while simple, can be extremely profound.

Finally, as mentioned above, children can discover much about the character of God and about how God is involved in people's lives through engaging musically with bible stories.

I often use the instruments as sound effects when telling bible stories. However, group composition activities that recreate a scene from a story are effective, particularly when theological discussion takes place during the composition process. This facilitates questioning, empathy with characters and a deeper understanding of God's part in the story.

For example, below is an extract from a discussion* that took place while composing a piece of music based on Genesis 1.

*children's names have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.

❖ **Ruth:** How does the story help us to understand a little bit more about God?

➤ **Daniel:** It shows us the steps God took to make the world.

➤ **Anthony:** He is a very important person.

➤ **Jamie:** He works in wonderful ways.

❖ **Ruth:** What's God like?

➤ **Dale:** Powerful.

➤ **Emma:** Important to us.

❖ **Ruth:** How does the story show that God is important to us?

➤ **Jamie:** He made us, the fish and the sea, the sun, moon and stars.

➤ **John:** He was pleased with it when he finished.

➤ **Tina:** We changed the tambour because it didn't sound right and then made it sound like God's heartbeat.

❖ **Ruth:** How do you feel about the music you have just composed?

➤ **John:** It's very relaxing.

➤ **Anthony:** I feel like God felt when he made the earth, proud of the music.

➤ **Jamie:** We should all be proud of it because we made it.

❖ **Ruth:** Does it help us to understand more about God?

➤ **Jamie:** It gives me a better picture of how God is. God's given me a gift to be able to play the guitar.

➤ **John:** It makes us think about how important God is, more than us.

➤ **Tina:** You can understand a bit more about what it was like to be there, and to feel how he felt.

➤ **Jamie:** It makes me feel sorry for my sins because God is so powerful.

❖ Here are other bible passages that lend themselves to composition:

Genesis 1 – the story of creation

Exodus 3 & 4 – Moses at the burning bush

1 Kings 18 & 19 – Elijah: Contrast the Baal battle with the "Still, small voice."

Daniel 3 – the fiery furnace

Lamentations 4 - contrasts

Ecclesiastes 3

Psalms 8 & 148 - creation

Acts 2 – the coming of the Holy Spirit

Mark 4 – the parable of the sower

Mark 4 v35-41 – Jesus calms the storm

Revelation 21- the glory of heaven

👉 **Conclusion and summary**

I conclude with my belief again that music is a medium through which aspects of spirituality might be encountered and I suggest that it can also be a starting point for theological reflection with children or groups of people of all ages.

In the light of the current interest in learning styles in children's work, there is beginning to be some interest in creativity as a method. My thinking and practice contributes to this methodology and my desire is that this piece of work becomes an informative document for those involved in face-to-face work with children, particularly those who are responsible for spiritual development. I hope that it will enable practitioners to respond practically and contextually to the spiritual needs of children, paving the way for the future.

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