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Music Making, Transcendence, Flow, and Music Education

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between flow, transcendent music making experiences, transcendent religious experiences, and music education. As a teacher-researcher, I studied my graduate students' autobiographical accounts of their experiences making music. Across these narrative writings produced over the past four years, a pattern emerged: many of the texts describe transcendent experiences. Transcendent music making experiences are distinguished by two main qualities: (a) that the performer is functioning at the height of his or her abilities; and (b) that the performer has a sense of being a part of something larger than him or herself in some way. The concept of transcendent music making experiences provides powerful insights into a unique feature of musical engagement. Music educators at all levels can relate to and learn from a more nuanced understanding of the unique qualities of musical engagement.

Introduction

One of my most wonderful moments was playing in the St. Matthew Passion. There's two orchestras in that, and I was playing in the first orchestra, so I was playing, you know, oboe, d'amore, and English horn. And it was hot, you know, and we were off in a corner, and that thing is three and a half hours long if you're lucky, and towards the end, and you know I'd taught school all day and went off to play the St. Matthew Passion, and you sit there for a long time and don't play, but then when you play, you don't, there's nowhere to breathe, and you play three songs in a row, just like that. So maybe I was just hallucinating, I don't know, but I was doing this English horn piece, and all of a sudden and I think maybe Bach does this, too, to you. Suddenly the room wasn't there, and the notes on the page weren't there, and it was just me and the music. And it was like, oh, you know, I live for this. You know, I live for this. So that's the best.

These are the words of Catherine¹, an elementary general music teacher and oboist who lives and works in the northeastern U.S. Catherine was one of the participants in a narrative research study that I conducted on the professional identities of music educators who are also active musicians (Bernard, 2004). As part of this research project, I heard many stories about specific times when the respondents were making music. In the excerpt above, Catherine relates a particular music making experience that she has had and describes its special qualities. Through this experience, Catherine was moved in the moment in an inspirational, awe-inspiring way. No longer was she in the room, no longer were the notes present on the page, no longer was she tired after having taught for an entire day before the performance. Here, playing the English horn in the St. Matthew Passion, Catherine found herself alone with the music. As she describes it, this is the kind of musical experience that she lives for.

Reading Catherine's words, I am struck by the ways in which she describes her experience playing the English Horn in the St. Matthew Passion as one of transcendence. Specifically, Catherine focuses on two ways in which this experience was extraordinary for her. First, it was a time when she was able to perform at her very best, despite the technical challenges of the music and her busy life as a music educator. Second, Catherine felt as though she was participating in something larger than herself, something far away from her day-to-day life and the specific elements and events of the moment.

For the last four years, I have been leading and teaching several courses in a Master's degree program that trains its students to become licensed music educators in the public schools. My

¹ All of the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

students do a great deal of reflective writing as part of the courses that I teach. In one course, my students are asked to write a series of autobiographical narratives about their experiences making music, teaching music, and learning music. Looking across my students' writings over the years, I have noticed a pattern in the stories that my students write and share about their experiences making music: many of my students -- about 70 percent of them -- have written about times when they were making music and experienced transcendence. Similar to the way that Catherine spoke about this particular concert in her interview, my students often write about particular occasions when making music took them to another place, when music making experiences were deeply meaningful and profoundly moving, when what they experienced was beyond the ordinary.

Transcendence and Music

This type of music making experience has not been widely researched. However, a few scholars have written about music making experiences like the one that Catherine describes above. Mary Alberici (2004) used the word transcendent to describe these experiences. For her doctoral dissertation, "A Phenomenological Study of Transcendent Music Performance in Higher Education," Alberici interviewed ten musicians who teach in higher education settings about their transcendent music performance experiences. She defines transcendent music performance as "the experience of rising above normal physical and mental fears and concerns to a peak experience that is remembered and sought after again and again" (2004, p. 22). Bennett Reimer (1995) refers to "the power of music to alter the reality of human experience and to alter humans' way of being" (p. 1) as experiences of profundity in music. As he continues to describe these experiences, Reimer draws on the concept of transcendence:

This power reaches to the very roots of the human condition -- that humans are conscious of their individual and collective existence in a world both including them and transcending them, on which they are dependent for life and meaning and to which they contribute life and meaning. (p. 1)

Asking, "[w]hat is that sense of transcendence that arises among people when exceptional musical performance occurs? What are the intangible but very real qualities that tell us we touched something beyond our present perceptions of reality?" (Palmer, 1995, p. 91), Anthony Palmer (1995; 2006) has used the word "spirituality" to explore these experiences and their implications for music education. Dr. Karl Paulnack (2009), Director of the Music Division at The Boston Conservatory, uses the words transcendent when he talks about the ways that musical experiences remove people from the material world and bring them together:

For at least 5,000 years we have been playing and teaching music so that people can have transcendent experiences, experiences that take them OUT of

the material world, that take them out there, in here, towards the divine, the spiritual, the emotional, towards each other. (p. 7, emphasis in original)

In this paper, I will use the phrase “transcendent music making experiences” to describe occasions of music making that are distinguished by two main qualities. The first quality is that the performer is functioning at his or her very best – at the height of his or her abilities. Second, these experiences are marked by the performer’s sense of being a part of something larger than oneself in some way – perhaps by being a part of a long-standing musical or cultural tradition, by being a part of a particular social group, or by being a part of larger forces of nature or of the universe.

This paper will examine transcendent music making experiences as they are portrayed in written and spoken narratives, as well as how they are described and analyzed in the literature. Drawing on a framework derived from the concept of flow, the paper will uncover some of the parallels between transcendent music making experiences and transcendent religious experiences. Finally, some of the implications for music education of developing a deeper understanding of these experiences will be addressed.

The Concept of Transcendence

Psychologist Abraham Maslow published the first scientific writings on the concept of transcendence. His exploration of transcendence began from his study of human motivation, through which he developed the hierarchy of needs theory (1954). Put briefly, this theory argued that a person’s more basic, lower level needs must be met at a minimum level before one can be motivated to satisfy higher order needs. The hierarchy of needs that Maslow created begins with biological needs like food, air, and shelter, and then continues sequentially with needs relating to physical safety, needs having to do with belonging and love, and needs such in the area of esteem before reaching the highest level of needs, those dealing with what he calls self-actualization, or personal growth and fulfillment (1954).

In later publications, Maslow discussed the higher order need for self-actualization at great length, and that discussion includes examinations of peak experiences and transcendence. Self-actualizing people, in Maslow’s view, are those individuals who engage with the world around them in total and full absorption, who make choices that enable them to grow rather than those that inhibit their growth, who are honest, who work to do well at what they choose to do, and who often have peak experiences (1971). Maslow uses the term peak experiences as “a generalization for the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, of the greatest joy,” writing that “I use the one term – peak experiences – as a kind of generalized and abstract concept because I discovered that all of these ecstatic experiences had some characteristics in common” (1971, p. 105). For Maslow, peak experiences are temporary experiences of self-actualization. He notes that “any person in

any of the peak experiences takes on temporarily many of the characteristics which I found in self-actualizing individuals. That is, for the time they become self-actualizers,” and according to Maslow, “Not only are these his happiest and most thrilling moments, but they are also moments of greatest maturity, individuation, fulfillment – in a word, his healthiest moments” (1968, p. 97). What sets self-actualizing people apart from the rest of us, then, is that self-actualizing people have more frequent occurrences of peak experiences:

This makes it possible for us to redefine self-actualization...as an episode, or a spurt in which the powers of the person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more integrated and less split, more open for experience, more idiosyncratic, more perfectly expressive or spontaneous, or fully functioning, more creative, more humorous, more ego-transcending, more independent of his lower needs, etc. He becomes in these episodes more truly himself, more perfectly actualizing his potentialities, closer to the core of his Being, more fully human....What seems to distinguish those individuals I have called self-actualizing people, is that in them these episodes seem to come far more frequently, and intensely and perfectly than in average people. This makes self-actualization a matter of degree and of frequency rather than an all-or-none affair. (Maslow, 1968, p. 97)

Peak experiences also provide an individual with the opportunity to experience transcendence. For Maslow (1971), transcendence has two main components. The first is the forgetting of oneself and one’s self-consciousness:

[t]ranscendence in the sense of loss of self-consciousness, of self-awareness, and of self-observing of the adolescent depersonalization type. It is the same kind of self-forgetfulness which comes from getting absorbed, fascinated, concentrated....this particular sense of transcendence of the ego or of the conscious self. (p. 269)

The second element of transcendence is going beyond oneself and sensing oneself as part of something larger:

Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos. (Maslow, 1971, p. 279)

Maslow's definition of transcendence has been influential in my thinking and undergirds the way that this paper explores transcendent music making experiences.

Another scholar who was influenced by Maslow's work is psychologist and researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who coined the term "flow" to refer to an optimal experience that is characterized by:

...a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. (p. 71)

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) began to develop the theoretical concept of flow by researching the experiences of experts of various kinds, including musicians. Expanding on these initial inquiries, he and his colleagues went on to interview people with varying backgrounds from around the world about their experiences. They found that experiences of play, experiences of artistic creation, and religious experiences are the types of experiences that are most often described as flow experiences.

In his later writings, Csikszentmihalyi forged connections between flow experiences and transcendence. His 1993 book, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, lays out these connections and explores them extensively. First, Csikszentmihalyi draws a relationship between flow and transcendence by explaining that a sense of transcendence is often a part of flow experiences. Describing flow experiences in this book, he notes:

Often we feel a sense of transcendence, as if the boundaries of the self had been expanded. The sailor feels at one with the boat, the wind, and the sea; the singer feels a mysterious sense of universal harmony. In those moments the awareness of time disappears, and hours seem to flash by without our noticing. (1993, p. xiv)

As the book continues, Csikszentmihalyi develops the argument that flow experiences lead to increased complexity of consciousness, which guides the progress of evolution for individuals as well as for the human species. Put another way, the more often an individual engages in flow experiences, the happier that person becomes, and the more complex that person's consciousness becomes, all of which make it possible for that person to contribute more meaningfully to evolution's progress.

To help guide the progress of evolution it is not sufficient for a person to enjoy merely any kind of life, but a life that increases order instead of disorder. To contribute to greater harmony, a person's consciousness has to become complex. Complexity of consciousness is not a function of only intelligence or knowledge, and is not just a cognitive trait – it includes a person's feelings and actions as well. It involves becoming aware of and in control of one's unique potentials, and being able to create harmony between goals and desires, sensations and experiences, both for oneself and for others. People who achieve this are not only going to have a more fulfilling life, but they are almost certainly more likely to contribute to a better future. Personal happiness and a positive contribution to evolution go hand in hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, pp. 207-208).

Further underscoring the relationship between flow experiences and transcendence, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) uses the term “transcenders” or “T-persons” to refer to those individuals who can be considered complex people because they devote their lives to complex goals:

Nowadays we don't have official names for complex persons, but what is more regrettable is our inability to distinguish them from others who do not contribute anything to the future, or who actually increase entropy with their actions. By not recognizing individuals who nurture harmony, we make it more difficult to learn from their example. To help alleviate this state of affairs, it might be useful to call a person whose psychic energy is joyfully invested in complex goals a transcender, or a T-person. (p. 208)

[Transcenders] are the kind of people who have learned to derive spontaneous joy and deep satisfaction from living their lives. Not from gaining riches or honors, but from the very process of living, from developing skills and overcoming challenges – from being a part of the evolutionary process that leads to higher levels of harmonious complexity. (p. 215)

In this way, Csikszentmihalyi sees the frequent engagement in flow experiences as the pathway towards the individual experience of transcendence, greater happiness, greater complexity of consciousness, and, ultimately, towards evolutionary progress for all human beings. Acknowledging his debt to Maslow, Csikszentmihalyi summarizes his argument:

Each person's goals are to a large extent similar to those of everyone else. Being human we all want, first of all, to survive, to be comfortable, to be accepted, loved, and respected. After these goals are reasonably satisfied – or

blocked beyond hope – we then turn our energy to develop our own unique potential, to achieve what the psychologist Abraham Maslow has called “self-actualization.” Then some people shift their priorities again, and envision the goal of transcendence. They attempt to move beyond the boundaries of their personal limitations by integrating individual goals with larger ones, such as the welfare of the family, the community, humanity, the planet, or the cosmos.... It is these last two stages in the formation of the self that lead to complexity. Individual uniqueness, or self-actualization, represents the differentiation component; transcendence involves a higher level of integration. Both are necessary for the kind of self that leads to a complex and harmonious evolution.... If the third millennium is to be an improvement over its predecessor, more of us will have to build selves around transcendent goals. (1993, p. 219)

Where Maslow sees peak experiences as the means to self-actualization and individual transcendence, Csikszentmihalyi extends these concepts to a broader arena by asserting their social and evolutionary implications. For Csikszentmihalyi, flow experiences lead to greater individual happiness and a sense of individual transcendence, which in turn can increase the complexity of an individual’s consciousness. Bringing these ideas to a social scale, when groups of individuals increase the complexity of their consciousness, this contributes to the progress of the evolution of the human species.²

Both Csikszentmihalyi and Maslow discuss music in relation to their conceptions of flow or peak experiences. Csikszentmihalyi devotes an extended section of his 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, to flow and music. He points to connections between the ordering of sounds and the ordering of consciousness, and cites historical examples of musicians who achieved flow as performers. Highlighting the powerful role that music plays in all of our lives, and especially in the lives of young people, Csikszentmihalyi laments the fact that music programs are often subject to cuts in educational settings and encourages his readers to get involved in music making (1990, pp. 112-113). Similarly, Abraham Maslow argued that music was one of the most powerful arenas of peak experiences: “...the two easiest ways of getting peak experiences (in terms of simple statistics in empirical reports) are through music and through sex. ...there are many paths to heaven, and sex is one of them, and music is one of them. These happen to be the easiest ones, the most widespread, and the ones that are easiest to understand” (1971, p. 175).³

² The aim of this paper is to explore the individual, subjective aspects of transcendent music making experiences, rather than their social aspects. The student narratives were written in response to prompts about the individual’s experience, and the analytical framework focuses on the individual’s subjective experience, as well.

³ Scholars in arts education and music education have written extensively about the unique qualities of artistic engagement. Presenting these qualities in terms that conjure up images of transcendence, and even drawing

Transcendence and Music in other Fields

Many different notions of transcendence and music have been put forth by scholars working in various fields, including music criticism, music therapy, and ethnomusicology. Music critic Bill Friskics-Warren writes about a universal sense of restlessness, “a longing for something beyond the every day” (2005, p. 12), that is expressed in popular music. He goes on to discuss three types of transcendence that can be found in popular music: mystical transcendence that seeks a higher spiritual union of some kind, transcendence of negation that responds to the world that surrounds them and is often filled with rage, and prophetic transcendence that expresses solidarity with the victims of oppression and suffering (2005, pp. 14-18). Music therapists write about transcendence in terms of going beyond one’s current state of illness and being able to heal, as well as going beyond the suffering that one experiences in terminal illness (Aldridge and Fachner, 2006; Gaynor, 1999; Levitin, 2008; Magill, 2006).

Transcendence via music has been associated with trance states, as well. Trance states and music have been discussed extensively by music therapists in terms of music and altered states of consciousness (Aldridge, 2006; Fachner, 2006; Levitin, 2008), as well as by ethnomusicologists in writings about shamanism and the use of drums and rattles to transport the shaman to a spiritual plane of consciousness (Byron, 1995; Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1990). Ethnomusicologist John Blacking writes about the transcendent aspects of music through two conceptual frames. The first of these is the notion of the sense of virtual time that music creates, and how one transcends everyday time and space through music’s virtual time. The second is the way that music enables individuals – particularly as Blacking observed it in Venda culture – to make powerful connections with one another by becoming aware of the “other self,” an intersubjective sense of self that is shared with others in society. Blacking summarizes both frames in these words:

It is because music can create a world of virtual time that Mahler has said that it may lead to “the ‘other world’ – the world in which things are no longer subject to time and space” (Bonavia 1956, 204). Likewise, Hindemith speaks of “victory over external forces and a final allegiance to spiritual sovereignty (Wilson 1962, 135); and the Balinese speak of “the other mind” as a state of being which can be reached through dancing and music (de Zoete 1953, 12f.). They refer to states in which people become keenly aware of the true nature of their being, of the “other self” within themselves and other human beings, and of their relationship with the world around them. Old age, death, grief, thirst, hunger, and the other afflictions of this world are seen as transitory events. There is freedom from the restrictions of actual time: we often experience

specifically on Csikszentmihalyi’s writings, they have used these qualities as the basis for advocating for the inclusion of the arts in the public school curriculum (Davis, 2008; Elliott, 1995; Greene, 1993; 1994; Paulnack, 2009).

greater intensity of living when our normal time values are upset, so that we appreciate the quality rather than the length of time spent doing something. The virtual time of music may help to generate such experiences (Byron, 1995, p. 34).

This article examines transcendent music making experiences by drawing on Maslow's definition of transcendence and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow. It defines transcendent music making experiences as those occasions on which one is making music and feels at the height of his or her powers (a sense of self-actualization), as well as a connection to something larger than him or herself. Narratives from pre-service music educators will be analyzed using a framework derived from the concept of flow in order to illuminate the parallels between transcendent music making experiences and transcendent religious experiences. Finally, the paper will turn to a discussion of the implications for the field of music education of developing a more rich and nuanced understanding of the connection between music making, flow, and transcendence.

Methodology

The narratives from the pre-service music educators that serve as the data for this study were written by my students in response to writing prompts from assignments in the graduate course, Seminar in Music Education. In this course, students write about and reflect on their experiences as music makers, music teachers, and music learners. Specifically, they are asked to:

- (1) Write three autobiographical stories about times when you were making music
- (2) Write three autobiographical stories about times when you were teaching music
- (3) Write three autobiographical stories about times when you were learning music

After the students submit their texts to me, I read them and analyze them using the tools and protocols of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; 2002; 2004) as a means of uncovering the unspoken assumptions and underlying thinking behind their words. I then bring the narratives to class, where students share and analyze the stories in pairs. Over the course of the semester, I assist my students in developing their analytic skills so that they can come to appreciate the many layers of meaning in the writings that they and their partners create.⁴

At the time that the students produced their narratives, they did so for a single purpose: in response to these assignments. The following semester, after their work in the course was completed, I approached the students and asked them for permission to use their texts as part of

⁴ I have written about this process in Bernard, 2007 and Bernard, 2009.

my research study. The students were provided with the opportunity to re-read their written materials and to include or exclude any of them for my study. Virtually all of my students over the last several years have granted permission for the use of all of their writing assignments. As I have continued to analyze my students' texts, I found Catherine Kohler Riessman's (1993; 2002; 2004) analytic framework for querying narratives to be particularly useful in enabling me to develop a deeper understanding of my students' ideas about making, teaching, and learning music. One aspect of Riessman's framework urges researchers to attend to the genre of story that is being told in a particular narrative (Bruner, 1990). As I analyzed my students' writings about their experiences making music, I was struck by the fact that their stories very often – about 70 percent of the time – were tales of transcendence. These tales of transcendence were shared spontaneously -- without any guidance, prompting, or preparation from me. This realization compelled me to explore more deeply and systematically the possible connections between music making, transcendence, and music education.

Flow, Transcendent Religious Experiences, and Transcendent Music Making Experiences

In their study of transcendent religious experiences, sociologists Mary Jo Nietz and James V. Spickard (1990) draw on the concept of flow experiences as a framework through which they can better understand the ways that their interviewees described their experiences of transcendence in religious contexts. Their analysis and discussion can easily be extended to the ways that my students have described their experiences of transcendence when making music. Nietz and Spickard (1990) identify several aspects of flow experiences that they consider to mirror aspects of transcendent religious experience. First, they note that neither flow experiences nor transcendent religious experiences are part of every day life. Rather, both of these are infrequent and special experiences that are markedly different from our usual experiences. Second, while one can prepare herself for flow experiences and transcendent religious experiences, when and how they actually occur is outside of an individual's conscious control. It is possible to create the conditions for these experiences to take place; however, it is not possible to make either flow experiences or transcendent religious experiences happen at a particular moment – rather, the experiences overtake a person. Third, in the case of both flow and religious transcendence, an individual has the sensation as though she is outside herself. Her senses are overcome, and the field of her experience is completely filled with what is taking place at the moment. It is as though the person is cut off from the world around her. Fourth, in both of these kinds of experiences, there is a sensation of selflessness, a state in which the self is superfluous to the experience. Finally, both flow and transcendent religious experiences are extremely difficult to describe with words. Nietz and Spickard's (1990) five aspects of flow experiences provide a helpful and thought provoking framework through which to analyze the narratives from my graduate students and research informants.

Narratives of Music Making Experiences and Flow

Catherine and the St. Matthew Passion

Catherine's narrative about playing the English Horn in the St. Matthew Passion, which opened this paper, describes her experience making music that exhibited qualities of transcendence. Four of the five elements of flow experiences that Nietz and Spickard (1990) used in their analysis of transcendent religious experiences come into play in Catherine's account. First, referring to the way she felt when she was playing the St. Matthew Passion, Catherine underscores the uniqueness of her experience as she remarks, "I live for this." Second, using the phrase "all of a sudden" and the word "suddenly" when she talks about playing the English Horn in that concert, Catherine emphasizes that she did not bring about her experience of transcendence; rather, she was overtaken by it. Third, evoking images of love and romance, Catherine describes being outside of herself and having her senses overcome. Her words are reminiscent of the age-old romantic cultural metaphor of falling in love at first sight across a crowded room, when she says, "Suddenly the room wasn't there, and the notes on the page weren't there, and it was just me and the music." Finally, Catherine minimizes the role that she may have played in this experience, as she says that either a hallucination was occurring or Bach and his music were responsible: "So maybe I was just hallucinating, I don't know... and I think maybe Bach does this, too, to you."

Sarah and the Brahms Clarinet Quintet

Sarah is a clarinetist who came to our Master's program directly after completing an undergraduate performance degree. In response to the writing prompt: "Write three autobiographical stories about times when you were making music," Sarah shared the following narrative:

The summer before my senior year of college I decided I wanted to play the Brahms Clarinet Quintet. This piece is every clarinetist's dream. Every movement is completely deep and passionate. It demands a huge amount of depth, expression and technique from the clarinetist. Asking around for players I managed to get four of my best friends to play it with me. We began rehearsing vigorously four hours a week with coaching. We worked through a million small details and played for master classes throughout the year and in the end played it for my senior recital.

There was a master class that we played in that was magical. That day the light was hitting the concert hall in just the right way, giving the room a soft glow and a warm silence. It was one of those moments where it is as if the music picked me up and took me to another world for just a little while. I forgot that I was playing for people. I forgot what the notes were and where I was. It was just the music and nothing else. This moment made everyday playing that was

hard, painful, stressful and frustrating worth it. Sitting in a practice room for hours in a day and staring at yourself in the mirror makes one forget the music that originally brought us there. Music sometimes becomes a love and hate relationship. The expectations, instructions, details weigh heavy upon voices that should be freely alive. I remember looking out the window as we were playing thinking that I will always need to play because it is who I am. It was at that moment that I realized I wanted to be a clarinet chamber musician.

Sarah's story highlights four elements of flow that, according to Nietz and Spickard (1990), figure prominently in transcendent religious experiences. To begin with, the experience that Sarah relates above is "magical" and markedly different from her ordinary life experiences. Second, from the way that Sarah describes her experience playing in the master class, it is as if she had very little to do with making her moment of transcendence occur. Rather, the music was responsible for the moment, as, in her words, "the music picked me up and took me to another world for just a little while." Third, Sarah writes about the ways that she "forgot" the world around her during the master class: "I forgot that I was playing for people. I forgot what the notes were and where I was. It was just the music and nothing else." Lastly, Sarah minimizes her role in this experience, crediting the way that "the light was hitting the concert hall...giving the room a soft glow and a warm silence." The music is the main actor in making Sarah's feelings possible, transporting her somewhere else, as she states, "It was one of those moments where it is as if the music picked me up and took me to another world for just a little while."

Janice and the Improvisation

Graduate student Janice is a cellist who plays alternative styles of music in rock, jazz, and klezmer contexts. Janice shared a very similar tale in response to the same writing prompt. She wrote about a time when she was playing a concert with a rock band:

When the show started, the band and I dimmed the lights and began to run the video we recorded. The video lit up the room perfectly as it projected against the conference wall. The band and I were really nervous, but excited to be playing this show. We began our performance with an improvisation, which we always like to incorporate into our rehearsals and playing. The improvisation set a calm mood to begin the night of music. With each note, we relaxed more and began to lock into a groove with one another. I was playing all the right notes as if I knew what my band mates were going to play next. Pamela, the singer, began to improvise a melody with lyrics, which lightly floated above the room of sound. The grand piano sounded amazing in the hall and the audience was locked into what we were playing. Everything was just right. Improvising freely can create amazing music when the chemistry is

right. That night, the band and I were able to communicate with one another through the language of music. It is difficult to explain in words, but when musicians really stop and listen to what is going on around them, beautiful music can be created on the spot. Music is very powerful this way. When the band and I started to improvise this piece of music together, I lost track of time and for just a few minutes the audience wasn't there anymore. We, the band, were in our own little world far away from everybody else. It is these musical experiences that fill me with joy that I am a musician capable of understanding such a feeling. This particular improvisation is one that I can't forget.

Four of Nietz and Spickard's (1990) aspects of flow experiences resonate with Janice's narrative. First, Janice makes it clear that this experience is not typical for her by describing it as "one that I can't forget." She continues, "It is these musical experiences that fill me with joy that I am a musician capable of understanding such a feeling." Second, describing the feeling of being outside herself, Janice remarks: "I lost track of time and for just a few minutes the audience wasn't there anymore." Like Sarah, Janice emphasizes that she and her fellow musicians were transported to another place together: "We, the band, were in our own little world far away from everybody else." Third, Janice does not consider herself to be the creator of this unique experience. Rather, she makes special note of the lighting and acoustics in the hall, as well as of the attention of the audience and the chemistry among the band members. For her, "everything was just right" at that concert – and the "everything" to which Janis refers has very little to do with her. Finally, Janice is the only one of our narrators to address the issue that describing such experiences can be very difficult. She explicitly states that it is challenging to use words to portray her experience: "It is difficult to explain in words, but when musicians really stop and listen to what is going on around them, beautiful music can be created on the spot. Music is very powerful this way."

Maristela and Brahms's Fourth Symphony

In the following narrative, violinist and graduate student Maristela uses religious language and metaphors to draw explicit parallels between certain qualities of her experience playing Brahms's fourth symphony and the qualities of a transcendent religious experience:

Then one day it happened. It was a sweltering day in mid-August in the last week of the program. We were rehearsing in the poorly ventilated, non-airconditioned gym, and it was nearing noon. We were playing the first movement of Brahms's fourth symphony. As the movement began to near the end, it seized me with amazing emotional force; I was overwhelmed to the point of tears. At the time, I had been attending an evangelical Christian church, and the people there frequently spoke about "being saved" and "hearing the call of God." It was something I never experienced, so it was

something I could not understand – until that day in the gymnasium. Whether it was God or Brahms, I had been called into something that was much larger than myself. It was a moment that simply confirmed my existence: this is why I am here. In a way, I had no choice in the matter anymore – I believe everyone has the power to control their own destiny and nothing is preordained, but when something of that magnitude speaks directly to you, you had better heed it.

It was the first of many “moments” I can remember. It’s not something I experience every time I play, and it’s not something I can wait for and anticipate. They always catch me off guard, but it’s usually when I need them the most. I will be sitting at a BSO concert, or playing in the orchestra rehearsal when I will feel that call again. Suddenly nothing else matters – I find sustenance in playing music.

Three of Nietz and Spickard’s (1990) elements of flow figure prominently in Maristela’s story. First, Maristela underscores that she had never experienced anything like what she experienced that day at the rehearsal: “It was something I never experienced, so it was something I could not understand – until that day in the gymnasium.” Second, Maristela notes that she does not bring about her experiences of transcendence, but is overcome by them unexpectedly. Describing “moments” like the rehearsal of Brahms’s fourth symphony, she states: “It’s not something I experience every time I play, and it’s not something I can wait for and anticipate. They always catch me off guard, but it’s usually when I need them the most.” Finally, Maristela ascribes the agency in her experience to something or someone other than herself. She explains that her experience runs counter to her core beliefs about individual agency. While she “believe[s] that everyone has the power to control their own destiny,” she acknowledges that the profound nature of this experience is unusual, as she states: “but when something of that magnitude speaks directly to you, you had better heed it.”

Musical experience and religious experience have been associated with one another in various ways for generations (Bogdan, 2003) across a wide range of cultures, including Hindu tradition, North American native tribes, Aborigines, Tibetan monks, Eskimos of Greenland, tribeswomen of New Guinea, priests in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, Apache rites of passage, East African tradition, and Shamanistic traditions around the world, as well as many others (Eliade, 1964; Gaynor, 1999; Harner, 1990). Using Nietz and Spickard’s five aspects of flow (1990) as a frame for analyzing and theorizing about the individual’s subjective experience of transcendence brings to the surface several striking points of convergence between transcendent religious experiences and transcendent music making experiences. The interviewees in Nietz and Spickard’s study of transcendent religious experiences (1990) and the four musician-educators whose narratives about music making experiences appear in this

paper describe what those experiences are like for them on an individual level in ways that highlight aspects of flow experiences.

Implications for Music Education

In this paper, I have endeavored to demonstrate that, to an individual musician, the process of making music can sometimes bring about the experience of transcendence. Through the preceding discussion and analysis, I hope to have made it possible for musicians and music educators to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experience of making music, and particularly the qualities of that experience that are like transcendent religious experiences – perhaps to encourage new ways of thinking about the experience of making music, or perhaps to contribute new resources to the ways that we communicate about what it is like to make music.

Here, I will turn to the implications of this notion for music education. While there has been little research in this area (Freer, 2006), a few scholars in music education have written about transcendent music making experiences and music education using slightly different frames and terminology. Anthony Palmer (1995; 2006) has discussed music education and spirituality, Bennett Reimer (1995) has probed into the experience of profundity in music, and Krista Riggs (2006) and Lori Custodero (2002) have examined different ways that flow might relate to music education – in private studios in the case of the former, and in classrooms with young children in the case of the latter. This paper’s discussion begins with a consideration of the implications of this research for music teacher education. If we as music educators would like to make it possible for young students in music classrooms and rehearsal halls to experience transcendence when they make music, we must first turn to the training and preparation of music teachers. Pre-service music educators should first be encouraged to explore their own music making experiences, with an eye to those occasions in which they experienced aspects of transcendence. They can explore music making experiences that they have had in the past through this lens by writing about and reflecting on these experiences. In addition, they can become alert to moments that may arise in their current or future music making experiences. Furthermore, they can seek such moments in educational contexts in which they observe, co-teach, or student teach. By identifying, analyzing, and probing these experiences, pre-service music educators will become better equipped to facilitate such experiences in their own classes and rehearsals (Palmer 1995; 2006). After investigating their own experiences, pre-service music educators should be introduced to the theoretical writings about music making and transcendence. Through readings and focused discussions, the next generation of music educators will become familiar with the qualities of transcendence that can be found in the experience of music making.

Developing my understanding of transcendent music making experiences has helped me to better assist my students as they examine their own experiences of music making. In the

course, Seminar in Music Education, I have drawn on the work of Maslow (1954; 1968; 1971), Csikszentmihalyi (1990; 1993), and Nietz and Spickard (1990) in discussions with my students. These conversations always take place after the students have written about their music making experiences, and after they have shared those texts with me and with one another. Invariably, themes of transcendence come up in the crafting, sharing, and analysis of these pieces. I draw on the literature in our discussions to help my students frame what they have discovered in their writing. These scholars have provided us with a vocabulary that we can use in our attempts to communicate about these experiences and their impact on us, as well as the potential for these experiences with young people in public schools. We have employed these researchers' concepts as powerful springboards for examinations of my students' experiences – for example, the theory of flow, the notion of self-actualization, and the concept of transcendence. As my students and I continue to explore and investigate these experiences by comparing and contrasting them, we draw finer distinctions between various aspects of these experiences and create deeper, more subtle nuances in our understanding. One group of students went as far as to create a tentative typology of transcendent music making experiences, which included suggestions of ways to create the conditions for those experiences in classroom settings.

Attending to our own experiences of transcendence with the subject matter that we teach makes all educators more aware of and open to our own mindfulness, as well as facilitating opportunities for mindfulness among our students in the classroom. As Palmer (2006) argues, “the teacher needs to experience a deeper and broadened existence to be able to lead students to heightened sense of awareness. And by exploring the higher states of consciousness in this manner, additional experience forms a base for theorizing about constructing conducive conditions for students” (p. 153). It is our job, then, as music teacher educators to provide opportunities for our students to recall, examine, analyze, and more deeply understand their own transcendent music making experiences as part of their training. In today's test-driven public school settings, there is little time or space in the typical school day to attend to and encourage mindfulness among our students. However, if teachers are better equipped to facilitate and appreciate experiences of transcendence, the school day provides many opportunities. Music class is just one of these. I firmly believe that experiences of transcendence can come about in the context of any subject area, under the proper conditions.

What our students need is teachers who can create the conditions that make transcendent experiences possible in their classrooms. In her study of young children and their engagement in musical activities, Lori Custodero (2002) identified three fundamental tenets for an approach to music education that provides students with the opportunity to achieve optimal experience or flow: (1) providing appropriate challenges to young students, (2) supporting students as autonomous learners who transform musical materials in personally relevant ways, and (3) designing musical experiences that are culturally and developmentally authentic (pp. 6-8). In

my view, these three tenets can be extended to classroom education in any subject as ways to create environments that facilitate transcendent experiences in school. Increased mindfulness can be possible throughout the school curriculum when young people are challenged appropriately and able to learn autonomously in personally relevant ways. Teachers who create culturally and developmentally authentic contexts and who are sensitive to and encouraging of transcendent experiences can help to facilitate such experiences among their students.

This argument has roots in my personal experience, as well. For me, the impact of the experience of transcendence through music making can be felt in other aspects of my life. I vividly remember the first time I was making music and experienced transcendence. I was singing a Yiddish folk song at a Jewish folk music festival in the Catskills about fifteen years ago. The performance took on a magical, other worldly quality – my accompanist and I were in perfect synch, I was able to express myself and the layers of emotion in the song effortlessly, and the audience was drawn into our musical world. That experience was so remarkable, so moving, and so satisfying for me that I found myself wanting more such experiences.⁵ And while I agree with Nietz and Spickard (1990), as well as with Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and with the narrators whose stories are shared in this article, that we cannot will transcendent music making experiences, once I had experienced transcendence while making music, it was as though I had started to work a muscle. I became better at appreciating such experiences, at recognizing them, and at creating the conditions for them in my musical life. Soon, I began to find myself experiencing transcendence in other areas of my life, as well – areas outside of music. Based on my experience, I believe that providing young students with the opportunity to experience transcendence through music making at school may set the stage for them to experience transcendence in other aspects of their lives, as well.

Several avenues of further research in this area would make important contributions to the field of music education. While this paper has focused on the individual's experience of making music, studies of the social aspects of music making experiences would be of great value. Other parallels between music making experiences, music teaching experiences, and religious experiences warrant further investigation, as well. For example, many speak and write of teaching as a "calling" (Hansen, 1995), and many musicians describe making music in similar terms. Furthermore, some musicians describe playing music in terms of being a vessel through which the composer's voice is heard, which is reminiscent of the ways that religious leaders have been likened to vessels for the word of God. Future research could more deeply explore the resonances among music making, music teaching, and religious experiences through empirical studies, as well as through philosophical and theoretical writings. Maslow argues that the ultimate goal of education is the student's self-actualization, and that it is the job of the teacher to help the student to become the best that she can be:

⁵ I write about this experience in more depth in Bernard, 2008.

...the function of education, the goal of education – the human goal, the humanistic goal, the goal so far as human beings are concerned – is ultimately the “self-actualization” of a person, the becoming fully human, the development of the fullest height that the human species can stand up to or that the particular individual can come to. In a less technical way, it is helping the person to become the best that he is able to become (1971, pp. 168-169).

Educators in all subject areas can strive towards this goal by creating environments that facilitate transcendent experiences with the subject matter that they teach, and by providing opportunities for their students to experience transcendence. By becoming more mindful of their own experiences of transcendence, educators can set the stage for more mindfulness in their classrooms. As teachers and students aspire to greater mindfulness and endeavor towards a more complex consciousness, they become collaborators in the progress of human evolution. As we conceive of education through the lens of transcendence, peak experiences, self-actualization, and flow, we can come to see the profound role of education for the human species.

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