

## **‘A Breeze in God’: The Spirituality of Music and Song**

### **International Conference.**

**September 10<sup>th</sup>-11th 2026.**

**Parthenope University, Naples, Italy**

**Organised by Raffaella Antinucci (Parthenope), Adrian Grafe (Textes & Cultures research lab, Université d’Artois, France)**

Why is spirituality so closely linked to music and song? Composer Philip Glass has said of the chant of Buddhist monks that it is ‘a tradition where the musical and spiritual inheritances of the community are really identical’ (Schaefer 14). One might go even further and say, with the Rilke of the Sonnets to Orpheus, that ‘Singing is Being’. With contemporary advances in the neurosciences, the growing scientific and medical interest in music therapy, and the acknowledgement of the role of music and song in many spiritualities and faith expressions, as well as ways in which religious allusions and references can be harnessed to otherwise secular forms of art, it would seem timely to interrogate such phenomena from various scientific and humanistic perspectives and theoretical standpoints. Can non-spiritual music and song be considered as granting access to spirituality, as a valid form of knock-knock-knocking on heaven’s door, and what kind of ‘heaven’ would that be? François Marxer (cf *Christus* 2009 311-318), for example, offers a ‘spiritual reading’ of Alban Berg’s Concerto for Violin. Conversely, purportedly spiritual or religious music and song can of course be treated as cultural, anthropological or musicological artefacts. It should be added that terms like ‘salvation’ (Adorno 7; Turner *passim*) and ‘redemption’ (Adorno 20) are used in music criticism, whether the music itself be explicitly spiritual or otherwise. What exactly makes some songs but not others ‘redemption songs’?

In a (Western) society marked by a profoundly secular perspective, by which much art and architecture is created without a spiritual conception, music retains a strong sense of connection with the spiritual or the sacred, whether it be on the part of the composer, the musician, or the listener. British musician Jacob Collier (2024) articulates his idea of spirituality as precisely that: connection ‘with something massive’, within and without himself, with others and with the world, with music but also in other areas. From a technical or musicological standpoint, can certain keys, scales, chords, notes, rhythms, or musical instruments, be considered as more spiritual than others, that is, more of a stairway to heaven than others? And, on a less solemn note, the spirituality of music and song can (even) be an irreverent space, one which allows the carnivalesque, the chaotic, the playful and whimsical, the spontaneous and the improvisatory to deploy itself (cf Boyce-Tillman 194).

True music, true singing, has to do with self-surrender, self-abandon, rather than self-expression. It is ultimately not an expression of anything: rather, it is being, or life, itself. ‘True singing is a different breath./A breath around nothing. A breeze in God. A wind.’ (Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus).

The organisers would love to welcome researchers, musicians, and people who are both researchers and musicians. Contributions may take the form of traditional academic papers, musical performances, creative criticism, or blendings of these approaches. With no pretence to exhaustiveness, and along with the above remarks, presentations might focus on:

- The phenomenology of spiritual experience linked either to composing music, listening to music, alone or as audience member, or to the playing of music (for example, musicians' accounts of spiritual experiences they may have had while performing)
- Questions of intention and reception: if the intention behind a work is spiritual, how far is it received as such – how far *should* it be received as such – by an auditor or an audience?
- Monastic singing, including Buddhist and Christian, as an intrinsic part of spiritual life
- Sacred choral music in different ecclesial traditions and communities
- Spirituals – the religious songs of black people in America, but also white spirituals; and musical compositions based on spirituals such as those of R. Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943)
- The nature of religious poetry inspired by music and musicians, a prime example being G. M. Hopkins's 'Henry Purcell'
- Musical settings of sacred texts and religious poetry
- The phenomenon of American Christian rock music (Lauren Daigle, Matt Maher, Rich Mullins), and the question of cross-over into mainstream genres and reception
- Music associated, rightly or wrongly, with so-called 'New Age' spirituality (*cf* Einaudi's 'Divenire')
- Music and song as an experience of time, timeless and eternity, or of 'infinite space'
- Music, song, faith and doubt, religious or otherwise
- Possible anti-spirituality in certain pieces or types of music (e.g. some kinds of heavy metal)
- Spiritual interpretations of non-spiritual works
- The role of silence in music and spirituality (e.g. John Cage's '4' 33''')
- Music as ritual or liturgical action (not merely as accompaniment to worship but as a spiritual act in itself)
- Spirituality and digital music
- Spiritual longing in secular music
- The spiritual dimensions of improvisation, especially in jazz, gospel, or spontaneous worship music
- etc.

Please send 150-word proposals for 20-minute presentations in English, accompanied by a brief biobiblio, to Raffaella Antinucci [raffaella.antinucci@uniparthenope.it](mailto:raffaella.antinucci@uniparthenope.it) and Adrian Grafe [adrian.grafe@univ-artois.fr](mailto:adrian.grafe@univ-artois.fr) by April 30th 2026. Notification of acceptance by May 10<sup>th</sup> 2026.

#### SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

David Chaillou (Textes & Cultures, Université d'Artois; and Université de Lille)

M. Cooper Harriss (Indiana University)

Marc Jennin (Université d'Angers)

Daniele Pistone (Université de Paris Sorbonne)

David Pouliquen (Université Rennes 2)

Enrico Reggiani (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UazL-Q61Zxw&t=42s>
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- Schaefer, John (2000), "'Songlines': vocal traditions in world music", in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, John Potter (ed.), Cambridge: CUP, 9-27.
- Spadaro, Antonio (2002), "La resurrezione di Bruce Springsteen," in *Civiltà Cattolica*, IV 14.
- Turner, Steve (1988), *Hungry for Heaven: Rock and Roll and the Search for Redemption*, London: W. H. Allen.
- Whidden, Lynn, and Shaw, Paul (2019), *Environment Matters: Why Song Sounds The Way it Does*, Oxford: Peter Lang.

## SELECT PLAYLIST

- Bach, J. S. (1727), *St Matthew Passion*.
- Berg, Alban (1935), *Violin Concerto*. Akiko Suwanai with Pierre Boulez, Lucerne Festival, 2003, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Qd9t18ene8>.
- Chaillou, David (2014). *Nunc Dimittis*.  
<https://www.universaledition.com/Werke/Nunc-dimittis/P0214051>
- Dylan, Bob (1979), *Slow Train Coming*, Columbia.
- Einaudi, Ludovico (2010), 'Devinire', live from the Royal Albert Hall,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIprTEhr9IE&t=5s>
- Parchman Prison Prayer (2023). *Some Mississippi Sunday Morning*, Glitterbeat Records.
- Pruess, Craig (1999), 'Om Tara', on *Sacred Chants of Buddha (Music for Meditation)*, Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqkToVchlaU&t=6s>
- Springsteen, Bruce (2005), 'Jesus Was an Only Son', from the *Devils & Dust* album, Columbia.
- Rebel, Jean-Féry (1737), 'Le cahos', *Les éléments: Symphonie nouvelle*.
- Tavener, John (1988), 'The Protecting Veil'.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DziyY5O\\_gnI&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DziyY5O_gnI&t=5s)
- Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1992), *Devotional Songs*, Real World.
- Vaughan Williams, Ralph (1906), 'Come Down, O Love Divine'.